

Don't Be Afraid by Mortifer

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Summary:

Another Stranger Things fanfiction. I've gone and done what we've all probably wanted to do at some point and added my own character to mix things up a little. Or a lot.

1. Rescuer

Author's Note:

Disclaimer: I do not own the Netflix show Stranger Things or any of the characters in it.

First attempt at fanfiction. Your advice and thoughts are welcome.

I observed the scene unfolding below me from my perch with a curious and yet still concerned demeanor.

A little girl, dressed in a muddied and now somewhat torn dress was running for her life. Her pursuers, the faceless humanoid monsters, were practically crawling over each other to get at her. Clumsier than the alpha I had been made aware of. Weaker. More killable.

Still incredibly dangerous in such numbers.

I looked on as one began to pull ahead of the others. The girl looked over her shoulder again and spotted the over eager monstrosity. With a quick, swift flick of her head an audible snap could be heard emanating from the creature. It collapsed in a most ungraceful manner as the girl continued to do her best to stay ahead of the oncoming tide.

You might be wondering at this time why I am not aiding her. Why I am standing idly by while she flees from these monsters with no small amount of terror. The answer is simple. Logical. Cold.

This a perfect way to see what she is made of.

For instance, I see her power drains her as her running becomes more deranged and wobbly after her last aggressive action. I can't help but notice her stamina and will at this point as well, especially considering her young age. But then...

It is truly amazing what you can do when you have to.

This dimension is quite a detriment in and of itself by nature. The faintly toxic air, lack of any real warmth, and decay that seemed to encompass everything. It certainly did not make my top ten list, or even top twenty for that matter.

And yet, she was enduring.

Being chased by the dark denizens of this twisted reality, but still enduring.

I cringed as I saw her make a turn into an alley that she could not possibly of known would see her cornered.

Despite my inaction thus far I was still ready to get involved when it became necessary.

After reaching the dead end and realizing her situation the girl turned to face the oncoming horde. As they started to fill the alley the girl, with a desperate look, lifted the alley's dumpster and flung it with surprising force at the ranks bloodthirsty abominations, incomplicating and injuring a few.

Impressive. I thought to myself, even as I saw her drop to one knee appearing dazed.

Yeah, I think it just became necessary.

There was a second reason I had waited this long to intervene if I was being absolutely honest with myself. One that I am not proud of.

I love making one hell of an entrance.

On that note I spread my wings and take off heading to finally help that curious little girl.

Eleven's P.O.V.

I knelt trying to clear the intense dizziness that threatened to overwhelm me. That last move cost me just as much as I thought it would. But what other choice did I have? I knew it was pointless against so many of the demogorgon's kin but I still had to try.

I still had to keep my promise.

Head still swimming I grabbed a nearby bent pipe, a tire iron I think I remember Dustin telling me, and stood up swaying a bit.

I pointed my weapon at them hoping against all odds they would at least hesitate.

They didn't. I was finished.

Tears streaming down my face and blood down to my lips images of my friends came to me unbidden. The images settled on one of them in particular. The one that had taught me what friends even were.

Mike.

I smiled even now, knowing my last thoughts would be of him. I couldn't have asked for anything more in this place.

The first one threw itself at me with reckless abandon and despite myself I swung the tire iron up to meet it as I braced for the impact.

As soon as the iron made contact the creature was sent flying back into the mass with its chest caved in. Dead.

All the creatures stopped as I looked on in complete shock. I couldn't have...

Just then something grey and with wings impacted the ground in front of me putting itself between me and the demogorgens. It stood up. A person? I thought in wonder. A person with wings? I have never heard of such a thing before. Wings are meant for birds right?

The thing, or person looked back over its shoulder at me, its face featureless. Actually its, or his, I think it's a man, entire body appeared to be foggy and unclear, but then I was still pretty dizzy.

"Don't be afraid", he said. His voice was powerful and yet kind.

He turned back to face the demogorgens and I could see the space around his hands start to blur. My chasers shook off their hesitancy

and charged towards my defender. I yelled for him to run but he stayed perfectly still. I saw three leap at him and my heart dropped.

There was a blur of motion, almost faster than you could blink, along with the sudden dropping of the three attackers' bodies. Each one fatally wounded in their own way. The man adjusted himself, still in the position where he had critically maimed the last one, and continued to fight the demogorgens. Well fight didn't seem like the right word. What was that word Mike had taught me when we briefly talked about that game, Dungeons and Dragons?

The name struck me. Destroy. Yes, that was the word.

He was destroying them.

Everytime it looked as though one was about to catch him unawares or in an ill position suddenly one of his hands were there cleaving apart the nightmares with impossible ease. Sometimes his hands didn't even appear to touch the demogorgens as they nonetheless accumulated mortal wounds.

Soon there were very few of them. Maybe five. As four of them jumped and charged at him, the fifth had leapt higher intent on getting past him.

Intent on getting to me.

Still too drained to use my powers I lifted the tire iron up again hoping for another miracle.

Just as the fifth was about to clear the winged man one of his wings suddenly snapped out, cleanly separating one half of the monster from the other as though his wings were razor blades. My miracle. The man didn't miss a beat either as he crushed the remaining offenders in a quick and brutal series of movements. Holding the last one by the throat he paused, as if studying it, before he spoke.

"Your hunt has come to an end. Now be no more." He crushed its neck mercilessly in one fierce squeeze, and let its body drop to the ground.

I stood there in awe and fear at the sight before me. My would be killers lay piled in front of the sudden intervener, already beginning to decay. The intervener still stood facing away from me, head bowed. But he could turn around at any moment. Did he mean me harm? Probably not. Why would he defend me then? Is he going to take me back to the bad place? I couldn't go back. The thought started to make me tremble and new tears began to form in my eyes.

He raised his head.

"I only mean you well," he said gently in that powerful, kind voice, "when I turn around you need not be afraid."

I kept silent. Not knowing what to say. As though sensing I was not going to answer he turned around and I was greeted to the sight of him. My mouth dropped open, my breath caught in my chest. For a few moments I could not believe what I was seeing.

He was indeed a man, but all his features were a little blurry. Like they were constantly shifting. His face, I had thought before to be my fear crazed imagination, was unrecognizable. His wings, also not somehow my imagination, were folded in.

And he was grey. Not just one shade of it either. It shifted like the rest of his features.

Seeing my shock and lack of understanding he raised his hands in a gesture of peace.

"I know, I know." He began. "My appearance is...unexpected. But fear not for I am here to help you. I am a friend."

Friend. I had never seen this winged man before so I don't know how he could be my friend. He didn't seem to be anything like the bad men though so I allowed myself to relax a little. Finally, looking back at the fallen demogorgens, I managed to formulate a response.

"Thank you," I said, almost a whisper.

"No need to thank me little one" he said lowering his hands with a warm smile. "Could you tell me your name?"

Not seeing the harm I answered.

"E-Eleven"

"Eleven?", he seemed to roll that over in his mind before saying, "A most intriguing name indeed."

"In-intriguing?" I asked blankly.

He chuckled, but it wasn't in a nasty way, like he was making fun of me or anything.

"It means to be very interesting." He clarified.

To be very interesting...

A thought struck me. Why *did* he help me?

I pointed to the still decaying corpses behind him.

"Why?" I asked.

The man appeared puzzled at my question.

"How about we talk more when we are in a safer place?" He suggested ignoring my question. "I would be remiss if we didn't at least get you something to eat after everything that has just happened"

My stomach growled at the mere mention of food.

"Okay." I conceded.

He nodded and started walking with a purposeful stride in a seemingly random direction, and looked over his shoulder to signal me to follow him.

I hurried to keep up with him when another question, so obvious I was surprised I hadn't asked it yet, came to me.

A bit cautiously I asked. "Who are you?"

The man suddenly stopped and paused. I hope I didn't make him

mad...

"Mortifer." He said with a faraway look, "You can call me Morty if you'd like."

"Mor-ty" I sounded out. He nodded confirmation. "You can call me El" I spoke.

He gave a smiling nod and continued walking.

I hope we get there soon. Where ever *there* is. My thoughts wander back to my friends. Back to Mike...

"I'm coming." I whisper. I don't know how but now I have a new strong friend to help me. Something like hope is flickering back into my heart. I *will* see him again.

"Promise." I say, barely a whisper.

2. The Lighthouse

Before long we arrive at the lighthouse, and I reach out with my psychic senses to determine if anything lies in wait.

Dead. Nothing.

Why a lighthouse? For someone like me it is easily defendable. Easy to set alarm traps. Easy to take to the air if need be.

Speaking of which...I look back at the little one trailing behind me with an analytical gaze.

Pale, exhausted, on edge. All of which are understandable. The only reason I hadn't picked her up and flew her here is because I had a hunch she would recoil against any form of contact.

But we were finally here.

"We must go up to the top," I say, gesturing with my hand and waiting for her response.

"Food?" She asked quietly doing a number on my heart.

"Yes," I say trying to smile warmly. "Food and shelter."

"Shelter?"

I paused before realizing it was a question. "Shelter means somewhere safe." I managed.

Eleven had a doubtful look.

I looked down in understanding. "I know. No where seems safe here. But this place will be as long as I am here." I stated with conviction.

She smiled.

"Promise?"

"Promise." I said returning her smile.

Eleven's P.O.V.

After climbing up all those stairs we finally made it to the top.

I was keeping an eye on my new winged friend, but he was just sitting there, legs crossed and eyes closed.

Odd.

So while I was waiting I searched the room for anything useful but the only thing I found was a well carved stick. Searching my memory I remembered the word for it: bat.

Walking back over to see if he was done...whatever he was doing, I set the bat down on the ground and sat across from him.

The air seemed to get warm around us or, at least, become not as cold. I looked at my new friend with confusion and wonder.

What are you?

He opened his eyes with a satisfied smile.

"We should be safe now." He said confidently. "I will know if anything nears our shelter and be able to prepare for it.

Still confused I asked, "How?"

"I am able to extend my psychic awareness and power beyond my physical form," he stated, "I have also seen fit to repel the less desirable part of this reality."

My brows furrowed as I tried to make sense of what he said. Usually I can at least understand other people but all his complex words were giving me trouble. Eventually I just gave him a helpless look.

He nodded, seeming to understand and clarified. "I can be somewhere without actually being there and I am pushing the darkness away with my will."

Nodding slowly to signify I understood a little better I began to really think on his words.

Being somewhere without being there...

I had done that quite a few times. Once in the little pool my friends had made for me, the others in the bath at the bad place.

But that was different. While I was there I couldn't be doing anything where I really was, and he appeared to be fully here. So maybe it was a little like what I do but also very different.

Pushing the darkness away with his will...

So he was making the Upside-down less...bad? I suppose I had already begun to notice. It wasn't cold anymore and the small amount of pain that came with breathing was no more. I took a deep breath to test this out and was happy to find that it was, in fact, true.

The same look of confusion and wonder returned to my face as I just stared at him.

Confusion from having no idea how he was doing what he was doing.

Wonder simply that he was able to do it.

He clearly noticed my expression but chose to remain silent until suddenly he grinned with what looked like eagerness.

"Well it's about that time," he spoke with enthusiasm, "are you ready for some food?"

I nodded vigorously without thinking. It had been a little while

since I'd had food.

"Good, but I need you to close your eyes."

I looked at him, yet again, with confusion on my face. Why would closing my eyes matter?

"I know it's weird but trust me."

Hesitantly I closed my eyes.

About ten seconds had passed when he told me to open them again. I opened them to see, to my complete delight, eggos! Sort of. They were bigger and puffier and drenched in syrup but they definitely had the same likeness. To the side of them were yellowish...I don't even know how to describe them, and some strips of cooked meat.

The happiness obvious on my face I looked at him to see him placing a pitcher of water next to the plate.

"Dig in!" He urged with a warm smile.

And that was that. As I pretty much attacked the food, eggos in particular, he rose up and began walking towards the door that led outside.

Panic gripped me. I had spent so much time completely alone in the Upside-down. The thought of being alone again filled me with sadness and despair.

"Mor-ty" I called, a bit begging as I asked, "Don't leave."

He looked over his shoulder with an odd expression just before getting to the door.

"It's okay I just wanted to take in the view. I'll leave the door open. That okay?"

"Yes." I said relieved and with that he stepped out leaving the door open so I could see him at all times.

After I was done with the eggos and yellow stuff I tried one of the meat strips.

I did not know something could taste so good.

They were gone all too fast after I scarfed them down.

Full and feeling much better than I had in a long time I got up and walked over to my new friend. He was leaning on the railing looking out at something. I suddenly became worried the railing would break and he would fall, but before I said anything I remembered the wings on his back. *Come on Eleven. He'll be fine.*

He gave no notice of me when I joined him a little farther away from the railing.

"No eat?" I asked.

"No." He said still seeming far away, "right now I do not require

such things for sustainance."

I nodded. But then I remembered a question he had never answered for me. Maybe he didn't want to answer but I had to know. Otherwise I wouldn't be able to trust him. I took a deep breath.

"Morty?"

"El?"

"Why did you...help me?"

He paused and I braced for his answer, expecting the worst contrary to all he's done for me already.

"Mortifer." He said finally.

I stared him with what seemed to be becoming my usual confused look while trying to make sense of his answer. I gave up after a bit.

"Don't understand."

He looked at me with a neutral expression. "It means that I helped you because that is who I am."

Oh. I didn't think I would be running into any good men while I was the Upside-down. The last person I knew like that was...

Tears started to form in my eyes as I remembered him. The one who always stuck up for me, always stayed by my side...

As tears started to roll down my face Morty knelt down, still taller than me, with an understanding look on his face. Hesitately, he placed a comforting hand on my shoulder.

"What were their names?" He asked softly.

I was starting to sob but I made myself say them anyway.

"D-Dustin, Lucas, H-Hopper, Joyce, and..." I knew if I said his name that was it but I made myself do it anyway, "and...Mike." As my body started to shake he pulled me into a hug. I tensed at first, since touch was usually associated with pain for me, but his embrace was meant to comfort and protect. That much was plain so I let myself sob into his chest.

"Are they alive?" He asked gently.

I nodded into his chest.

"Sssaved them" I managed.

"Then I'll bet they're looking for you." He said with confidence.

As my sobs subsided I pulled away and looked at him with hope.

"Really?"

"Of course. Now how about we go back inside and get you some rest okay?"

Already starting to feel sleepy I nodded.

Maybe things would start to get better from now on. Tomorrow I

will ask my odd friend if he could help me get back to my other friends.

Get back to Mike.

Especially Mike.

Notes for the Chapter:

Next chapter will finally involve Mike and the others.

3. Intervener

Mike's P.O.V

It had been two months since she had disappeared along with the demogorgon.

For two months we had kept looking for her. Usually, we'd search the woods around Will's house or the area around the Hawkins lab. We made sure to keep our distance with the second one though as we didn't know if they still had people keeping security despite everything that had happened.

Even though we hadn't really turned up anything the guys were still well on board. When it came right down to it. We had all been saved by her. Even Will.

But right now, we were just sitting in school, watching the time go by. I was thinking about our next campaign. Plans and such. Even though we make sure to look for Eleven as often as we can I can see the guys need a break from time to time.

I was shaken out of my thoughts by the school's intercom.

"Michael Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Dustin Henderson, Lucas Sinclair, Will Byers, and Jonathan Byers please report to the office." Spoke a female voice.

The guys and I looked at each other confused. The teacher seemed a bit thrown off as well but gestured for us to head on out.

On our way down the hallway we tried to make sense of this weird announcement.

"You think we're in trouble?" Suggested Lucas.

"Definitely." Stated Dustin.

"We don't know that," Will interjected, "maybe it's something good, or something about..."

"Eleven." I finished for him, my stomach clenching at the very thought. We walked the rest of the way in silence, hoping against all odds that our news was about our lost friend.

Jonathan's P.O.V.

Well this can't be good I thought as I crossed through the door's threshold into the hallway.

Looking to my left I caught Nancy Wheeler, looking beautiful as ever, coming out of her classroom as well.

She smiled, which I instantly returned, as she walked over to me.

"Hey Jonathan," She spoke, "any idea what's going on?"

"Not a clue, but I've got a bad feeling about this."

She nodded. "Me too. Walk there with me?"

"Of course" I said grateful someone else was picking up on the same thing I was.

And so we began walking.

Denise's P.O.V.

I had a grin on my face as I awaited the loose ends. This was one of the favorite parts of my job.

I always make sure to do my research and learn about my targets before I carry out the deed, not to determine whether or not they deserve it but to enjoy the assigned task all the more.

The more unfair and cruel the better.

Those soon to arrive had been privy to the recent Hopkins lab incident and a certain telekinetic little girl(now deceased).

What was left of those weaklings at the lab had the lack of intellect to just let them go.

Fortunately the higher-ups were not so squeamish. Hence why I was

here.

You might say that I'm a sort of government black ops assassin. Well, more like assassin master if we're being honest. To prove it I have called a third of my cadre to ensure the job was completed.

Two groups were headed to dispatch the older targets, my group, on the other hand, were here for the younger ones. Some of them being very young indeed.

I licked my lips as I thought about the potential of the lives I was soon to snuff out. This would be a pleasurable experience indeed.

But first, focus on the plan.

The school faculty were under the impression we were doing this for their protection. We had a different agency that would tend to covering up of their disappearances. The whole building was under our observation so it's not as though they could slip away right beneath our noses.

So, this should be rather easy, or end up being quite messy. Honestly each outcome had its joys.

But for the moment I would wait.

Joyce's P.O.V.

Staring at my house's scorched hallway I couldn't help but chuckle.

At least they had an extensive and creative plan when it came to killing that thing. It was hard to be mad when I felt a surge of pride every time I laid my eyes on the damage dealt.

But how to fix it is the question.

Hopper had already helped a good deal by fixing the hole in the wall amongst other things but this was the last glaring defect still present.

I gave up brainstorming after a bit and went to make something to eat for when the boys returned home. I'm sure this will be the last couple days I'll be able to do so as soon I will be returning to work.

Just as I opened the fridge all the hairs on my back stood up.

Something was here. I could feel it.

The boys won't be coming back today Joyce Byers.

I flinched at the voice, not knowing what direction it had come from I grabbed one of the kitchen knives and began to search the house.

There's no need for that, for I am not physically present with you. I need you to listen to me. I am an ally.

The voice was clearly male. Strong and intelligent.

Ignoring the voice's suggestion I opened the door to Jonathan's room...empty, nothing out of place.

You are all in danger. Even the little ones.

I stopped. Little ones. My boys. I didn't know if the voice was telling the truth but I had to know. I walked back to the living room and started putting on my boots.

I need you to call Hopper and go save the Wheeler household. Get them somewhere safe. I will protect the little ones. Trust me.

I laughed out load. Trust it? This voice I had never heard before wanted me to trust it? Forget that. I pulled on my coat and grabbed the keys heading for the door.

The Wheelers currently have an infant they are caring for yes?

I stopped dead. What a dirty little move...

I had thought so. If you do not believe me and my words hold no stock then you need not worry about the little ones or any of this for that matter. But assuming I am telling the truth and I am trying to help you. You can leave the little ones for me to protect and in turn go save the Wheelers. I can only be in so many places at once.

Damn, he had a point. If he's telling the truth and I go to check on the boys anyway the Wheelers could end up...I don't even know. On

the other hand if he was just trying to lure me away from the boys then...wait no, that doesn't make sense. Why would he inform me of any of this if that was his intent?

So...

The Wheelers were in trouble.

Shit.

I turned around and began dialing Hopper's number.

"So we're heading over, now will you please tell me what was so urgent I had to come all this way to get you this very moment?" Hopper asked clearly irritable.

It was a fair question. But how to word it without my sounding crazy. Well, crazier than I had to sound.

"Someone told me that you, me, and the Wheelers were in danger. I believed them."

"Someone?" He inquired.

I just shrugged.

He made an annoyed sound before pressing further.

"Come on Joyce," he reasoned. "What could you possibly say that would be crazier than everything we've already been through?"

Hm...that was kind of hard to say without seeming obtuse. Still, this was gonna be a tough sale.

"I had someone tell me in my house...without them being in my house."

Hopper's eyes widened. As his stream of questions rolled in.

"Like Will used to with the lights or something?"

"No..."

"Was it Eleven?" He asked hopefully.

"Definitely not." I stated firmly. "This was a man."

"Then how do you know you can trust him?" Hopper obviously inquired.

"I just do." I snapped. After a couple seconds I took a deep breath and continued. "Listen Hop. I was right about my son, the monster in the walls, everything. Please just trust me on this."

He seemed surprised at my playing that card but in a moment he nodded and said, "Done."

I smiled a little as we pulled into the Wheelers' driveway.

Hop was the first to the door. Knocking on it loudly.

Steps coming down stairs could be heard before the door swung open revealing Karen Wheeler who wore a surprised look in her face.

"Chief Hopper?" She started. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Pleasure is all mine Mrs. Wheeler, but I'm afraid I need you and all your family in the household to come with me for your own protection."

"What's wrong Sheriff?" Asked Ted coming up behind his wife with little Holly in hand. Hopper nodded respectfully to the man before saying, "We have reason to believe you are all in danger right now. Please if you come with me right now I will take you to a secure location."

"What about Michael?" Karen asked with fear in her eyes.

"Michael is..." Hopper looked at me, I nodded, "safe right now. It's you guys I'm worried about. Please come with me and I'll explain everything on the way."

After a brief hesitation, Ted Wheeler nodded and they all got on shoes and coats to head out.

Once we were driving away from the house I sighed in relief. Until I heard the fricking voice again!

Tell him to drive away casually. They are near.

"Hop drive away slowly. Normally." I warned.

He looked at me weird but then complied. We both looked in the review mirror and saw a series of black vehicles forming the makings of a parameter around the front of the house.

We both gave each other the 'Holy shit' look and kept facing forward making sure to keep an eye on them at all times.

It looks like things just got real.

Jonathan's P.O.V.

As we neared the office we saw Will and his friends coming down the hallway too.

"Hey Jonathan," Will greeted, "hi Nancy."

"Hi Will," Nancy replied smiling briefly, "hi everyone." They all muttered their hellos.

"You guys know what this might be about?" Mike asked.

"Not a clue," I tell him, "but let's stay on our toes." The boys nod solemnly. "Alright..." I look back at Nancy who nods too, "let's go." I push open the door and step into the office, the others trailing behind me.

The office secretary looks up at us with a nervous expression and points us to one of the doors in the office. I nod and continue through.

As I enter through I see two lightly armored men with odd looking helmets. They vaguely remind me of knights. That is if knights were clad in black and armed with machine guns...

In the middle though was a woman. She wore similar if slightly altered looking armor but without a helmet. Admittedly I had to take

a moment to appreciate her...um...physique. Sue me I'm still male.

She gracefully turned around revealing her to be rather young, maybe early or mid twenties. She also was, unfortunately, just as, if not more, physically distracting from the front as she was from the back.

Mike, who had yet to reach the age where he could be distracted by such things, spoke up first.

"Who are you and what do you want?" He questioned, the distrust obvious in his voice.

The young women grinned, but there was something wrong with it. Something dangerous in her eyes.

"Ah hello there Michael," She said, grin growing wider as she saw Mike's surprise at her knowing his name. "I am Master Denise of the Dark Hunters. I have been sent here by your government to take you to a secure location for questioning."

"Questioning about what?" Nancy asked trying to divert attention away from her little brother.

"Come now Nancy, just think about recent events. It'll come to you." The Master said with just a trace of teasing.

We were all silent. The subject was obvious. We had thought all had passed over us but we'd been wrong. Now the wolves were back at our door. Mustering up my nerve I asked a question that could potentially get us all killed but nonetheless had to be asked.

"And if we don't want to come with you?" My voice comes out hoarse.

Her grin fades to a small smile, her eyes full of anticipation. "Then..." She says slowly, "things will have to get a little...messy." The two guards click off their safeties, the message clear.

I look back at the others to see they're terrified expressions. Except maybe Mike who just has a look on his face that can only be described as murder. Fearing he might make a move and get somebody killed I speak up quickly.

"We'll come with you."

"Good!" The Master replies cheerfully. "Shall we then?"

And so we were all 'escorted' out the building into a bunch of black vehicles. Two going to each. Mike and Will in one, Lucas and Dustin in another, Nancy and I in the third. Then we were off.

Our car had a police car like setup in it. Not that I would know about those kinds of things...it was an accident okay? Walls and bars between us and the front section of the car. I subtly checked the door handle, yep, childproof. Nancy's eyes widened she realized like me we were stuck in here.

"Jonathan..." She whispered looking at me making it hard to focus. "Please, promise you will stay with me." Her eyes pleading.

"Yeah of course," I whisper back soothingly taking her hand and feeling my heart speed up a little. Despite our circumstances she seems more at ease and wore a little smile.

God I hope the others are alright.

Mike's P.O.V.

Were these the people who had tried to take Eleven? It didn't seem like it but the anger in me still rose.

If I get half the chance I'll...

"Mike," Will whispered, "calm down. We need to wait for our opportunity."

Was it that obvious I was angry? I took a deep breath and tried to settle myself. Will was right. We would have to be calm and collected if we were gonna even have a chance at getting away.

I nodded to him to show I understood. He smiled and we continued on in silence.

Dustin's P.O.V.

Shit shit shit! We are so dead! Done. Over!

My breathing is abnormal because I am freaking the fu...dge out.

"Dustin!" Lucas scolds. "If you keep freaking out they might just shoot us right here!"

This doesn't help. I start to panic even more.

Lucas sits back thinking of a way to calm me down I would imagine. Suddenly his eyes light up.

"Dustin I bet you one of my top 10 comics that you can't keep it together for the next hour."

Chuckles at his bet I feel myself start to settle down. A comic? I can't ignore that.

I finally grin and say...

"You're on."

Mortifer's P.O.V.

Well, unless I'm wrong they should be here at any minute. I mean I did see them secure the area and boobie trap the side of the woods with razor wire just in case.

The use of the place was obvious. It was an execution line up. The large grave had already been dug. One grave for them all. Barbaric.

There were only two guards designated to watch over the area and they kept in the trees for concealment, stepping expertly around the razor wire with ease. Hm...decent training.

Interesting. Either way this would serve me well as when the moment comes I should be able to quickly remove them from the picture without anyone noticing.

As for the weapons of those coming...I should have enough psychic power present in me to render their firearms useless.

Normally this would not be an issue but that's what happens when

you're constantly projecting nearly half of yourself into another dimension, and using that half to fight nonetheless.

As long as I can get into close range the Gift should help me emerge victorious.

"Speak of the Enemy." I barely whisper as I see three black vehicles approaching.

"Yes the site's secure." I hear one of the guards say into his mic. Well, I guess it's about that time.

I leapt down, sorely missing having wings, and kicked the first one in the neck. As I land on my feet I hear the crunching of leaves coming towards me. I do a sweeping kick at the appropriate time knocking her off her feet, didn't notice she was a girl till now, she tried to surge up but I hammered her back down with a powerful blow of my fist. She tried again and again I replied with force. I took her in a sleeper hold pinning her arms with my legs. Suddenly her legs were around my head (damn she's flexible) trying to yank me off. I persevered and soon her legs went limp. I held on a couple seconds longer anyway just to be sure it wasn't some ploy to get me to lessen my grip prematurely.

As I rose up I could feel the faint bruising on my face begin the heal quickly already. One of the multiple perks of the Gift.

Speaking of which I cast my gaze back over to where the cars were now parked. The new opponents were now getting the little ones out of the vehicles. I snuck to where I was just within the tree line. About 30 meters. I could close that distance pretty fast. Just a moment longer.

Number of those to protect: six. Two teens. Four pre-teens.

They began to herd the six near the pit. I gathered my will create a psychic bolt within me.

Number of opponents: thirteen. Only twelve carried machine guns though.

Those twelve raised them to fire.

I released my psychic bolt and began sprinting. The Gift kicked in and as suddenly as my bolt shredded their guns I was amongst them straight arming one to the ground and kicking another with such force and quickness to the chest that they were propelled off their feet into the person behind them.

They were still in shock as I kicked another's knee in and delivered a quick strike to the neck.

You may be wondering how these trained men and women are getting it handed to them by one guy. It is a fair question. The Gift allows me to move incredibly fast with great strength. It affects my mind too as I'm able to perceive it all as though time was going normally for me. It has other uses but those are the main points.

As I begin to parry and strike against my many opponents I yell out, "Jonathan! Get them out of here!"

He appears stunned or entranced not doing anything.

"Now Jonathan!" I practically roar. Still in the mess of conflict.

He snaps out of it and leads the others to one of enemies' vehicles that they'd left running.

After they drive off I bring my full focus to the matter at hand and quickly incapacitate the rest of the opponents. My Gift withdraws and I survey the scene.

Ten, eleven...only twelve? I could of sworn there had been...just then a sixth sense told me to duck.

I ducked right as a blade passed through the area where my head had been a second ago.

I look over to the source and saw a pale brunette rising up from behind one of the remaining two vehicles.

Denise's P.O.V.

As I rose up the young man regarded me. Surprisingly not with even a slight edge of lust tasting his features.

I had watched him take on twelve of my hunters without suffering even a minor wound. Fourteen if you count the two I had placed as guards over this site. That was impossible. The speed he'd used was inhuman. I couldn't even make out his fighting form because he had been moving too fast.

But he had stopped moving fast and the rings of white fire in his eyes had died away. I thought that maybe I could take him out in one quick, silent strike. But somehow he'd dodged that even without his superhuman speed.

I sized him up. Noting his about six foot height, and subtly muscular structure.

I also couldn't help but notice his brown skin, like caramel, and black hair that seemed to be being pulled just slightly upward by gravity itself. He was handsome by most standards. In different circumstances I'd consider taking him on a very much different fighting ground.

He smiled and held out his hands in a false gesture of goodwill. "Come now sister. We don't need to fight one another. There are two vehicles still here. Let us head our separate ways."

I snorted. "Please. We both know that isn't going to happen so let's just get on with it." I put on an innocent face. "Unless you don't want to strike down a lone young lady." I eagerly awaited his indecision and confusion.

I got none. He just kept smiling but lowered his hands and chuckled.

"You are a lot more than that I suspect, you are a warrior." He declared.

"Wow, strong and intelligent. Man after my own heart." I sneer and kick off the ground darting at him.

He's ready and deflects my opening moves, lashing out with moves of his own. We both strike and parry back and forth for what seems like a long time. I notice he hasn't resorted to his inhuman speed so maybe he's burnt out. I grin thinking he is as good as mine then but

my overconfidence bleeds into one of my moves which he, having remained entirely focused on me, takes full advantage of. Before I know it he has me raised up and brings my stomach down to his knee.

Reeling on the ground, out of air and unable to move I can't help but think, Really?! I lost to him? Damn it!

"You are a superb fighter sister." He compliments but it feels like mocking. "I will leave you to your devices as those are the rules. But as for the rest of your warriors...I will deal with them another way."

Rules? What rules?! What is he talking about? And my warriors? That would set me back a couple steps. Damn him!

"Anyway," he continues, "till next time." I see him pull back his fist. I mumble a, "wait," but he doesn't and everything is darkness after.

Notes for the Chapter:

Chuckles That was fun. Don't worry. Eventually there will be more sweet parts of the story. Eventually.

4. Know Everything You Know

Will's P.O.V.

We were speeding along the outskirts of our town. Jonathan was at the wheel with barely contained panic in his eyes, continuously regarding the review mirrors for any who might have followed.

I am barely containing an outburst myself. Dustin, Lucas, and Mike were trying to make sense of what just happened but I'm just still in shock

"Did you see how he vaporized their guns without a second thought?!" Dustin exclaimed.

"Vaporized is a strong word," Lucas remarked.

"You know what I mean man, and did you see how fast he was moving? It was wild!"

"Maybe he's a superhero like El," Lucas suggests.

"I don't know," Mike interjected, "I mean moving fast and stuff was never something El could do, and even though he was fast I don't remember seeing any tattoo on his arm like Eleven had."

"Good point," Dustin conceded, "but did you guys see his eyes?"

I had. I suspect I'll never forget. It's like he had rings of white fire around his pupils. In a different circumstance they might have looked benevolent, but when he was fighting they just looked like wrath incarnate.

"I know man!" Lucas confirmed. "They were crazy."

"I wonder if we'll see him again," Mike murmured. "I mean he was facing a lot of those guys."

They were all silent. The question hung in the air.

"Where are we going?" I heard Nancy ask Jonathan. I was a bit curious too.

"I don't know yet," he admitted.

Tell him to go to the quarry. Hopper and the others are heading there now.

My eyes widened. No one else appeared to have heard it and it had not been my own voice in my head just now. Seriously, at this point what else could go wrong?

"Jonathan..." I called.

"Yeah Will?"

"Take us to the quarry."

"What? Why?" He appeared confused.

"Hopper will be there waiting for us." I say uncertainly.

He looks back with even more confusion. The others stare at me in shock.

"How do you know this Will?"

I meet his gaze, trying to look more confident than I really am.

"I just do. Trust me." I press. He pauses, then shrugs and says, "Good of place as any."

My friends give me nods to show they believe me and pride at their faith in me makes my heart swell.

I just hope Hopper and them are actually there.

Hopper's P.O.V.

Okay. Get Joyce Byers: check. Get the Wheelers: check. Drive to the quarry and wait for the kids at the behest of some voice in Joyce's head...check.

Well, I suppose stranger things have happened.

Like that time we went to save Joyce's boy from that place that seemed to resemble Hell and our world at the same time.

Speaking if which where is that kid, along with all the rest of them for that matter?

As if on cue we heard an approaching vehicle and turned towards the noise. One of those black cars came into view prompting me to place one hand on ol'faithful. Everyone else took cover behind the truck.

The car stopped about twenty feet away. The door opened and I braced myself for...Jonathan. Relief flooded me as he raised a hand in greeting. I returned the gesture and let my hand fall to my side as I watched the rest of the youngins get out of the car.

The reunion was to be expected. The kids rushed over to meet their parents, the parents embraced them, etc. The two kids Dustin Henderson and Lucas Sinclair walked over to me asking if their parents were safe. Figuring, hoping more like, the same voice that protected us would probably have protected their parents too, I told them yes hoping I wasn't lying.

Then they told me everything that had happened with them. Everything from the school to the drive over here. I was speechless at first before my mind started going into overdrive trying to fit pieces of the puzzle together.

Some lowlifes had tried to kill them, discreetly, but someone had intervened and saved them. Who were the lowlifes? Who was the intervener?

As these thoughts rolled around my head I completely missed the faint crunching of leaves coming towards us.

"Chief," Mike warned, and I was suddenly aware, turning towards the direction the steps were coming from. They grew closer and closer until finally he emerged. Some brownish young man with hair that seemed to gravitate *away* from the earth. He wore an easy, wary and weirdly genuine looking smile on his face.

"That him?" I ask.

"Yep," Mike confirmed. "His eyes are different though. Normal."

"Right."

He stops ten feet away from us and holds out his hands in a gesture of goodwill.

"There is no need for that Sheriff Hopper." He says sootheningly. "For I only mean well for all of you as you can plainly see through my recent actions."

Not realizing my hand had gone back to ol'faithful I hesitantly let it fall back to my side. He nodded his thanks.

"Now then, I suspect you all have a lot of questions but the long and short of it is that a higher government agency has deemed you all a liability to be cut loose. I come from another place that is both far and not so far away. I will not allow this to happen. A destiny has permitted me to anchor here and until it is fulfilled I will help with all I can."

There is a long pause. None of us know what to say to something like that.

After a few moments pass I ask the obvious.

"So what happens now?"

His expression grew thoughtful. "The best course of action seems like it would be to have you guys stay put at the nearby lodge. Only few know of it."

"What about everything else?" Joyce questions.

"All in good time." He says cryptically. "Hopper would you be so kind as to destroy the tracker on one of the cars? I'll see to the other one."

"Err, sure." I mutter figuring playing along is my best bet I walk over to the car. As I'm searching for the bug, questions are just running wild in my head. Like, for one, why is this happening, who's this guy, and can we really trust him?

But, I think to myself, does it really matter? Right now we have no choice but to follow him, or risk those government thugs catching up with us.

I find the bug and crush it beneath my boot. As I look up I see the stranger doing the same.

He nods respectfully to me then his smile returns.

"Now then," he seems oddly cheerful when he starts speaking this time, "how about we hide these vehicles in the trees and start trekking there?"

Mortifer's P.O.V.

I heard audible gasps when we entered the lodge. I smiled. I suppose it did look rather impressive for a building in the middle of the woods.

"Make yourselves at home. You'll be spending a little time here afterall."

Before I got past the 'home' part the younger ones had taken off, with their parents calling after them to be careful.

It did my heart good that even in such a grim situation they were still able to be kids.

I turned back at the adults. "Okay, Ted, Karen find a bedroom to lay claim to, same with you two, Hopper, Joyce..."

Hopper coughed and Joyce seemed to turn a bit red. "Um..." Hopper almost stuttered. "We aren't together."

Oh! The body language between them implied as much. But God knows I've been mistaken before. I was quick to remedy the situation.

"My apologies. Honest mistake. Please do find rooms of your own then. We will talk soon after."

They both seemed like they wanted to say something else but after a moment they shrugged, looked at each other, and went to go do exactly that.

I directed my attention to the two remaining teenagers. Raising an eyebrow I began. "I may have been mistaken with the Chief and Ms. Byers but with you two I am certain. You may find your own rooms or share one. I have no illusions you would not seek to do so anyway if I sought to prevent it." With a smirk I turned my back on their surprised, also embarrassed, faces and began walking to the outside porch to collect my thoughts.

Nancy's P.O.V.

My face still flushed I look over at Jonathan, who was looking down trying to cover the redness in his face too.

"Um..." I tried, not knowing what to say next.

"I'll just go find *my* room and leave you to it." He says awkwardly. I try to ignore the disappointment in my chest.

He gets halfway down the hall before I muster up my courage.

"Jonathan?" I call out.

"Yeah Nancy?" He replies turning around.

I bite my lip. My mouth feels dry. Come on Nancy. Just say it.

"I'll probably end up calling you over anyway like I already have before," I say quietly still feeling heat in my cheeks.

When I have had nightmares about that place and that...*thing* from time to time again in the past I found myself calling him for comfort in the middle of the night. More than once.

"Might as well cut out the middle man right?" I manage to get out.

He just stares at me for a solid four long seconds. Thankingly before I start to fully panic, and take back everything I said he smiles.

"Yeah. Sure Nancy." He says looking as red as I must be.

I smile back playfully. "Well lead the way Jonathan Byers." I urge him. His smile grows as he turns on his heel and starts walking.

I follow behind him quickly as we go to find *our* room.

Mortifer's P.O.V.

I inhaled the good outside air. You know, the kind of air you only get when surrounded by trees.

Now then...the Hendersons and Sinclairs should be arriving within the hour per my guidance. They were actually remarkably easy to direct since, for some reason, they seemed to instantly know of my good will towards them. Most odd, but I'll take a break where I can get one. As for the government types...I'll see to them in due time.

As if on cue the parents' aforementioned children approached me from behind. They stood there a moment, the two of them, hesitant to disturb me. It would not have bothered me but nonetheless I decide to wait for them to speak.

The curly haired one spoke first. Dustin? Yes, it was Dustin. The other would be Lucas then.

"Excuse me sir." He managed.

I smiled and turned to greet them. "Hello Dustin. Lucas. What can I do for you two?"

He looked anxious now. "Um, um we were wondering if you got ahold of our parents too." Lucas nodded to affirm his friend's question.

"Of course!" I smile wider when I see their visible relief. "They should be here within the hour."

"Thanks mister." Lucas says with a grin.

"Not a problem." I reply. "But could you do me a favor and fetch everyone else? I believe it's about that time."

"You got it sir!"

"Sure thing mister!"

They dart off, presumably to gather everyone. I look back at the trees and sigh.

Here we go then. Time to figure this out.

Right before I went to walk back inside I suddenly felt weak and a little faint. Ugh...I guess maintaining my other half was taking a toll on me. At least it wasn't actively fighting right now. Still, it would only grow more difficult the longer I had to maintain it. Once I was united to it again though, everything would change.

But until then, I would make do.

Straightening myself I finally made my way back inside...

...Only to be greeted by everyone staring at me. My smile returned reflexively.

"Now then. I need to know all of what you guys know so that I can figure out where to get started here."

Eleven's P.O.V.

I woke up to the smell of...more food?! What? For a second I had to remember where I was and who I was with.

"Morty?" I called out. Already beginning to fear I was alone again.

"Here El." I turned to see him standing outside again, but still within sight. "Be sure to eat up. You have much strength you need to recover."

He didn't have to tell me twice. Just like that again I was eating as

though it had been days since my last meal. A couple questions strike me.

"Morty, what is this?" I ask holding up one of the strips of meat.

He turned and grinned at the sight of it. "Now that is called bacon. Do you like it?"

I nod vigorously.

"I'll be sure to get more next time." I smile widely at this. But it does bring up my second question.

"How?"

He cocks his head to the side for a moment before he answers.

"You know how this is one dimension right?" I nod. "Well with my power I am able to reach across dimensions for my own purposes. Like getting you food."

"Mike?" I say excitedly.

He seems to understand but sadly shakes his head.

"I do not know little one," he says, and I feel disappointment crushing my excitement before. "I will need to be certain of something first." I just stare at him in question.

"I need to know all you know." He states simply.

I start to despair a little. I was never very good with words. How would I explain, as he says, all that I know? The thought of not being able to see Mike and the others just because of this starts to make my eyes water a little

He is at my side in a moment, almost scaring me, placing a reassuring hand on my shoulder.

"There is no need to be sad little one." He consoles. "You do not have to tell me, I just have to see."

I look at him with my usual confused expression.

"Another perk of my power." He clarifies. "But I need your permission." He holds a hand over my head.

Whatever it is, if it helps get me back then fine. I nod hesitantly and he places the hand on my head.

Suddenly I feel everything fall away. Blackness surrounds me but strangely I'm not afraid. Then everything changes again and I am seeing through my eyes back to the bad place. I can feel him, Morty, also there with me.

I know I should feel terrified right now but I feel nothing. Somehow I know he is actually the one feeling and experiencing all of what I felt back then and I'm actually the one just watching.

It's...so weird.

After awhile we get out of the bad place, away from Papa, and it shows my friends finding me. Things start to move faster after that but I can tell he sees everything.

It shows Mike putting make up on me. I wonder if he's knows how hard my heart was pounding having Mike's face so close to mine.

He sees our searching for Will, and my sabotaging the compasses.

My time spent alone in the woods after.

Our reunion after my saving Mike.

Mike cleaning my face, again with heart pounding.

Me flipping over the van.

The pool.

Mike's lips touching mine.

The bad men.

The demogorgon.

The goodbye.

I wonder if he can hear what my thoughts are in that moment. For I had so very many but only had time for those last two words.

Goodbye Mike.

He sees me fighting the demogorgon for the right to exist in the inbetween and my coming back together in the Upside-down.

He sees my surviving from a box that Hopper had set up for me, and then he is caught up.

Everything goes black again for a moment and then my vision returns to see him removing his hands from my head and shoulder with tears flowing from his eyes.

"I'm so sorry El." He whispers. It sounds strange with his powerful voice.

Still in the strange unfeeling mode I ask calmly, "Why?"

"You did not deserve any of those terrible things that were done to you. Those people failed in their most elementary task, and they will have justice wrought upon them one day." He voice grew angry there at the end causing me to tense up as I felt the air become electric. It quickly died away though and I could feel myself return to normal. So many thoughts and questions ran through my head again. I held back tears as the memories of that *place* and my friends intermingled. So now can he help me? Now can he get me to Mike and the others?

Now would I be able to keep my promise?

"Morty..." I say.

He looks at me, more composed now, steady. Like before. His head inclined.

"Mike?" I ask hopefully.

He hesitates. For more than a few moments. He understood the question I implied, that was certain, but seemed to be trying to

phrase his answer.

"I cannot." He finally spoke.

My heart sank. Confusion and sadness soared through me again.

"It is against the rules for me to interfere with something like that." He says before I can ask him why. "When it comes to reuniting you and him only a few people will be able to contribute. At least contribute in a major way that is."

Still confused but a with a bit of hope rising back up within me I ask him the obvious.

"Who?"

"You, Mike and the boy you rescued, Will."

"How?"

"They will come for you. You will have to be ready. But don't be afraid. I will help you get prepared if you want."

I nod, still reeling from the idea of my friends coming to get me. Them doing so, coming here no less, just for me, creates a warm feeling inside my chest. This must be a kind of happiness I think to myself as I smile.

"Morty what are rules?" I ask suddenly.

He seems to consider this for a moment before explaining.

"You know what promises are yes?" I nod. "Good, well promises you don't break. Rules are similar. The difference is you can obey them for any number of reasons. Sometimes you can bend them, and sometimes, though very rarely, you *can* break them." He finished.

Rules. They sounded odd to me. But maybe they won't seem as strange later down the line. I notice my winged friend seems lost in thought again. I give him a couple moments to gather himself.

"They found you in the woods outside the lab." He states. "That is

where they will come for you. We should head there now." He rises and walks outside to the railing. I follow him wondering how we'll get there anytime soon. I don't even know where it is from here.

As if he read my mind he turns to me and gently says, "El, we can be there within the hour if we fly. But...that means you'll have to trust me."

I stare at him with wide eyes. I had never flown before. I'm pretty sure most people haven't since I've seen no one else with wings. Fear grips me at the thought. But I had to keep my promise, so I mustered the courage my friends had inspired in me and nodded.

He picks me up carefully, holding me the same way Mike and Dustin had and steps onto the railing. Terror suddenly grips me but before I say anything he leans forwards and we both fall off the railing.

I'm pretty sure all the Upside-down could hear my scream.

Notes for the Chapter:

They'll finally be reunited in the next chapter. So yeah, that'll be nice.

5. Retrieving El

Mortifer's P.O.V.

Alright. It seems I'm about caught up on this end. The adults and little ones have told me all they can.

Well, almost all that they can I think to myself as I eye the two boys Mike and Will. I'll need to speak with those two privately to discover what they are holding back.

"Alright everyone I think that'll do for the moment." I interject to their discussing their shared information.

"What do you mean?" Hopper asked inquisitively.

"I mean we've been here for a couple hours and had nothing to eat." I explain brightly as I stand up. "I would be a terrible host if I did nothing to remedy this."

"I think we're all fine." Hopper started.

I let some of the Gift touch my eyes before saying, "Regardless, I must insist."

The whole room went silent. No doubt from seeing my eyes in such a state, but I just casually walk over to the kitchen and begin getting to work.

After a while into my cooking Joyce Byers makes her way over to me.

"Hey there." She says with a gentle yet cautious smile.

"Howdy." I smile back continuing with my preparations. "What can I do for you Ms. Byers?"

"Oh nothing. I was just coming to see if you could use any help."

Odd. It had been awhile since anyone had offered to help me. I tried not to let my surprise show.

"I appreciate the kind offer but I'm afraid that I'm nearly done." I manage while putting the finishing touches on everything.

She nods in understanding and, if I might add, looking a little impressed too. "You work quick. Maybe once this all blows over you'll come cook at our house?"

I chuckle. "Yes that sounds like a nice future time." There is a long silence. "You have something else you desired to say?" I remark with faint amusement knowing they all must still have so many questions about me.

"Yes, um," she hesitates, "I just wanted to know why you're doing

all of this. Helping us I mean. You could have turned a blind eye and let those thugs kill us. But you didn't. Why?"

"Mortifer." I reply without missing a beat.

"Mort...what?"

"Mortifer." I repeat. "That is my name, and my reason."

"Mor-tifer." She tests the name out. "Not your usual name you see nowadays."

"Neither was Eleven." I state and regret doing so when I see a deep sadness come over her. There is silence again.

"Eleven. Can you help us get her back?" She asks with a hint of desperation in her eyes.

I think for a moment before answering.

"Kind of. When it comes to something like that I can only help out so much and in a certain way."

"Why?" She has a confused look on her face, not that I blame her.

"Because those are the rules." I state with finality.

"Explain please."

"Hard to. But it might be easier once I've had a one on one chat with the Wheeler boy Mike and your son Will."

"Why do you need to talk to Will? I hear her protective mother side coming out. "And Mike." She adds as an afterthought.

Not backing down in the slightest I say firmly, "Because they are both hiding something that could be of great importance."

"Like what?" She seems taken aback.

"I don't know." I admit. "But I kind of have a sixth sense for these kinds of things. Regardless, the food is ready. Help me take it in?"

She does help me but her eyes appear to be looking at something far away. No doubt mulling over in her head all we had just discussed.

Mike's P.O.V.

Well he certainly could cook one heck of a meal.

After we were finished he casually asked to see me and Will out on the porch. Giving each other questioning looks we follow him outside.

It was a gloomy day out right now, looking as though it was gonna rain, but the stranger, or Mortifer was his name, seemed to enjoy it all the more.

"So gentlemen." He started. "Do you know why I wanted to speak to

you two alone?"

Will and I exchange glances and shake our heads.

"Well..." He cocked his head a little to one side. "I wanted to hear what you two refained from saying in front of the parents." He said simply. Seemingly without a care in the world.

"Um, um..." I stammered out looking guilty as hell.

"What? We didn't hold anything back." Will lied more gracefully. "You know everything we know."

Mortifer's face changed to an amused expression clearing seeing right through us. He chuckled before speaking. "Now Will, your attempt at deceiving me was far superior than that of Mike's, no offense there Mike, but you'll have to be far more convincing if you ever want to pull the wool over my eyes." His eyes started glowing with that white fire again and we audibly swallowed. "Now listen." He said far more seriously. "This is important, and I want to help you all but you two need to tell me every detail you kept back."

We both looked at each other uncertain.

"Alright how about I help you two out." He coaxed. "The girl Eleven, who was closest to her?"

My cheeks started to feel a little heated and I saw Will subconsciously look at me.

Again Mortifer wore an amused expression. "Judging by the story I already have with you specifically being the one sheltering her at your family's house, Will's accidental pointed expression at you, and the fact that your face just changed a shade redder, I have my answer."

And my face only turned all the more crimson, completely validating everything he just said.

"Now tell me Mike." He pressed. "How *did* you feel about your friend Eleven?"

Well that was a complicated answer, one I didn't really know how to put in words. Not right now anyway.

"I, um, asked her to the Snowball." I mumble out.

He seemed intrigued and slightly on the verge of breaking out laughing. Will just gawks at me in surprise.

"This is a sort of school dance I presume?"

I nod.

"Dude you didn't tell me..." Will started.

"You never asked." I say lamely turning back to Mortifer, figuring it was probably best to focus on one of my interrogators. He wore a

curious look on his face now but it held a hint teasing in it.

"Last I checked. One usually only asks someone to a dance for one of two reasons. With you, I can see pretty clearly which one it is." He grins wickedly making me feel pretty small.

What's worse is, he's probably right.

Figuring I couldn't be any more embarrassed I stand up straighter and say.

"I promised her. That we would go I mean." Wow, it sure was hot out here. Maybe it was the humidity or something.

Or something.

His face grows serious again. "Promised." He echoes. "Hm, well that explains one rule. Now Will you're up next." He turns his inquisitive gaze over to Will, who visibly seems to get smaller. "You were in this place called the Upside-down for quite some time before the Chief and your mom found you strung up by otherworldly organisms. Do you suffer any aftereffects?"

Will just stood frozen, knowing any lie he attempted would not be accepted. Finally, with a look of resignation on his face, he spoke.

"You guys can't tell the others, promise?"

"Done." Mortifer responds.

They both stare at me intensely and I can just feel the pressure on. Not that it was needed of course. I wanted to hear what Will had to say.

"Promise."

Will accepts this and continues. "I puke up slugs from the Upside-down and then briefly appear there. Or at least I see it." He states flatly.

I stare at him in shock. The question plain on my face. *Why didn't you tell me?*

He meets my stare and smirks. "You didn't ask." But his smirk quickly recedes. "I wanted everything to be okay and I thought it would stop. But it hasn't."

"We could have tried to help you." I exclaim.

"How? They're in my body and I'm sure there's no way even a doctor could help." He says calmly.

"But..."

"No buts Mike. You know I'm right."

I did. But that my friend was suffering all this time without my knowing it kind of shook me. What kind of friend am I?

Mortifer had remained silent until now. "The last two puzzle pieces

come together." He murmers before actually speaking up. "Okay, it is near what I expected. Kind of. We should be able to get this Eleven back but it has to be just the two of you, otherwise I cannot assist you in any way, and I suspect my assistance may prove useful yet."

My heart soars. Get Eleven back? The one whom we've been searching for all this time? She could finally meet Will and we could go to the Snowball together.

Just like I promised.

"What do we need to do?" I ask, my heart starting to pound in excitement.

"Yeah!" Will joins in.

"First let me tell your parents we're going for a walk." He said, smile returning along with his common demeanor.

"And then?" I can't help but ask with excitement as he starts to walk back into the house.

He stops to look over his shoulder at me.

"And then you'll take us to where you first found Eleven."

Denise's P.O.V.

I'm pretty sure the amount of rage that radiated off me was actually able to be felt by my cadre surrounding me.

I had let my prey slip through my fingers. He seemed to be at his weakest and still I failed. I wanted to lash out and strike something. Anything.

I took a deep breath.

But that would be showing weakness in front of my warriors and I couldn't have that.

"Anything?" I asked my scouts over the comms.

"Nothing master." Multiple groups answered.

I had to admit, despite my frustration, I was actually a little impressed. Whoever this newcomer was, he had successfully managed to safeguard our multiple targets at once. How he did this I may never know. If I capture him though, I'd have plenty of time to try and rip the answers out of him.

I grinned at the thought. To have someone with that strength and intelligence at my mercy would be exquisite.

That being said, we still had yet to locate him, or the others.

Again I wanted to lash out at something, but before I got to squash the impulse for the second time there was a sudden terrible ringing in

my ears. Before I could even try to shake it off it grew louder driving me to my knees. I was barely aware if my cadre around me anymore, when suddenly I heard the voice. It was evil, corruption, and filled with power.

THE ANOMALY NEARS HIS OBJECTIVE. KILL HIM BEFORE HE RETURNS TO HIS FORMER POWER.

My eyes were watering and my head was pounding. Still I managed a thought. A word. A question.

Where?

I WILL GUIDE YOU. ARE WE AGREED?

Yes.

The ringing suddenly stopped and I could hear everything again.

My entire cadre knelt around me. Concern was plain in their features, but we didn't have time for that.

I rose up. "Send word for the rest of the cadre here with us in Hawkins to form up with us. We have a hunt to complete."

One of my advisers spoke up.

"Master we still have no idea where they are."

"I have a hunch." I stated simply, and no one dared contest me. They had seen my hunches come true time and time again.

I could already feel a pull within me, drawing me to my prey.

Soon, I grin, soon you will be mine.

Eleven's P.O.V.

We'd been here for awhile now. In the woods where they found me. Still nothing. I looked over at my new friend feeling doubt start to creep up.

He had been standing almost perfectly still for the past hour, not saying anything. But that was okay. At least I wasn't by myself.

Still, he noticed my look, and finally stopped whatever it was he was doing. Inclining his head towards me questioningly he asked. "You doubt you'll ever make it out of here?"

I nodded, sadness plain on my features.

"Have you faith in your friends?"

Another word I hadn't heard before.

"Faith?"

He looked at me with an expression of genuine surprise before rephrasing.

"Do you think Mike will not keep his promise?"

What? Mike would never do that to me. I'm his friend. He wouldn't break a promise to me.

"No." I answer firmly.

Morty smiles. "See. Then you have nothing to worry about."

I smile at this, feeling a little better.

"El?" Morty asks.

"Yes?" I turn back to him.

"Mike means alot to you doesn't he?"

For some reason I feel my face get warmer before I answer.

"Yes."

"Might I make a suggestion?"

I nod, a little suspicious of what he means by 'a suggestion'.

He hesitates before speaking. "You know I saw everything from your eyes right?"

I frown. "Yes."

"Well it seems to me that you had quite a few things you wanted to say to Mike before you said goodbye. I suggest you write them down or simply remember them for a later time."

"Why?" I ask curiously.

He smiles. "Trust me. It will make for a wonderful moment between you and him."

I feel the corners of my lips curl up upon the thought of making Mike happy.

"Okay."

Silence follows until he suddenly raises his head in an alert manner. I look at him asking *why* with my eyes.

"They will be coming for you any moment now." He states.

Hope and excitement rise up in my chest.

"But something else approaches. Something big, and strong." He says quicky. "It means you and the others harm. I will go out to meet it, so that you and the others can escape." He stands up and spreads his wings wide. Panic coursing through my system I reach out and grab his arm. I plead with my eyes.

Don't leave me.

Don't stay here in this place.

Come back with me.

He smiles at me, confidence radiating from his eyes.

"Don't worry little one. We will see each other again soon. Just be ready for Mike okay?"

I don't let go, holding his gaze before saying the only thing I can

think of.

"Promise?"

There is no hesitation. "Promise." He says.

I make myself let go of his arm and then suddenly I'm alone, left only with my tears.

Mortifer's P.O.V.

"Yes. That's the plan." I confirm.

"Will that really work?" Mike asks.

I shrug. "If it doesn't I'll step in."

"Okay."

So it was simple. Will ejects a slug, Mike holds onto him following him to the Upside-down then lets go so he can stay there and find Eleven. Or El, as he would call her. After, I 'convince' Will to eject another slug and with that he will bring Mike and El back to this world.

Simple. Large margin for error though.

If only I could just come with them, or even tear open a portal there myself.

But that would break the rules. Mike had to be the one to save her. It was how it had to be. Only under certain conditions could this be rendered not so. None of those conditions had been met to my knowledge.

Regardless I was keeping an eye out for my 'other half' doing so in case conditions became met on his end. Not sure which I was hoping for.

Will began to start yakking up the slug, I nodded to Mike as he gripped Will's shoulder. This was it.

And just like that they were both gone.

Mike's P.O.V.

This place. Was. Wrong.

There was no other way to describe it. I could see Will's face fill with dread upon seeing it again. I didn't blame him.

The air stung to breathe in a little, the smell and sight of decay was prevalent. For a few moments, I wanted nothing more than to just keep holding unto Will's shoulder and leave this place as quickly as I arrived in it.

But El was here.

She had been in here surviving God knows how all this time.

I can't leave her here.

I will not leave her here.

"You sure about this Mike?" Will asks, giving me a fearful look as I take my hand off his shoulder.

"Yeah." I try to put on a brave face, at which Will suddenly grins.

"Go save your girlfriend!" He yells.

I roll my eyes before yelling back.

"She's not my girlfriend!"

"Not yet." He smirks and disappears.

That little...

I shrug this off and start yelling for El hoping she's nearby somehow.

"El!" I shout out.

I see something changing in the sky a little ways away but getting closer. It looks like some kind of storm, or an approaching black void.

"El!" I call out again, waiting a few moments for a response. Nothing. Then...

"Mike!"

El! That's her voice. She's really here! I feel tears start to form but hold them back. It doesn't matter right now, not with El so close.

Yelling louder than I have in my entire life I call out again.

"El I'm here! Come to me!"

Mortifer's P.O.V.

Unbelievable. How could my luck have possibly been this bad?

I stared down the Old One hovering in the air. Its power radiated from it. Even just now seeing it I could tell its intent.

Dominate. Enslave. Corrupt.

It stared at me with what I could only recognize to be faint surprise.

I WAS NOT EXPECTING TO CROSS PATHS SO SOON GREY ANGEL.

"And we need not Old One. There is no need for conflict here."

NO? YOU COME FOR THE GIRL TOUCHED BY POWER DO YOU NOT?

Shit. Well, lying was never my strong suit so...

"I do. I will return her to those who care for her, and leave in peace."

The Old One remained silent for a few moments before tilting its

head and speaking again.

Well I suppose a better word for what it did in place of speaking would be communicating.

NO. SHE WILL REMAIN HERE AND BECOME ONE OF MY CHAMPIONS AS I SHAPE THIS REALITY TO MY WILL. STAND IN MY PATH IF YOU DARE ANGEL.

I sighed.

"So it is, and so it will be." I recite before firing a massive psychic bolt at my new enemy without warning.

The being was caught by surprise and thus not able to bring a counter move into the picture before it was sent flying into a nearby building.

That should buy me a little time. I won't be able to go toe to toe with this thing unless I am made whole again, otherwise I face certain defeat. If I fail then El doesn't get to go home. Unacceptable.

An Old One is here.

It is intervening directly.

The condition has been met.

I quickly make my way over to where I had left El but stay a little ways away since I feel another presence very close to her. Searching the new presence's mind for a name I find just what I was hoping for: Mike.

My other half had done just what I suspected, as I had done just as he suspected.

But now it was time to become one again.

I tear open a portal next to me and wait.

I see a portal a little ways away suddenly open.

I guess the condition has been met.

Crap.

Okay. I sense the government goons approaching. They'll be on us any minute. More than before. But if Will can get Mike and El while I lead the goons away and disappear into the portal, then we may yet pull this off. The leader's bloodlust, the young women I faced, would make stringing them along easy. But I doubt such bloodlust will last once she came face to face with the portal.

Settling on this I move into action.

"Will, I need you to get Mike and El now."

He looks at me hopelessly.

"I don't think I can."

I kneel facing him, he meets my gaze awaiting my response. I pause, before saying, "Forgive me." Before he can ask why I swiftly ram my fist into his stomach, and begin sprinting to the portal. The Gift kicks in and I'm there in no time leaping into the portal.

The first thing I see is my more angelic looking self holding his hand out to me. With a smile I take it, and become whole again.

Denise's P.O.V.

The hyper lethal enemy had fled into what appeared to be an open rift. The little kid on the other hand had simply disappeared. Not like, he moved really fast disappeared, but that he literally ceased to be.

I ordered one squad to wait where the kid was last seen and called the rest to me.

I'll be damned if I let him escape me again. Nothing will deter me. Not even this portal.

"Be ready to fight and kill." I advise my Hunters leaping into the portal's opening.

Eleven's P.O.V.

I rushed towards the sound of his voice still hardly believing my ears.

"El! I'm here! Come to me!"

I heard exactly where that had come from and ran towards it shouting, "Mike, wait for me!"

"I will!"

So close...

I rounded a tree and there he was.

Mike.

Tears started to roll down my cheeks as I ran towards him. He was doing the same and suddenly we met in a fierce hug. I held unto him like my life depended on it and he held onto me tight like he thought I might disappear on him at any second.

Finally, after all this time being here and thinking about them, thinking about him, I just let it all go and started weeping into his shoulder. He didn't seem to mind at all as he kept holding me.

Finally...I'm back with you.

"Mike?" I ask, voice failing a bit.

"Yeah El?" Oh how I had missed his voice.

"You kept your promise." I whisper.

I could feel his smile. "Always."

My crying dies away enough for me to smile now.

Suddenly we hear someone collapse next to us making injured noises. We both look down in surprise to see...Will! How had he gotten here?

"Hurry." He mouths out.

Mike seemed to understand. Reaching down to grab Will's arm and told me to do the same. I do so despite my confusion and suddenly, we're no longer in the Upside-down. We're where they first found me all that time ago.

I made it out. After all this time, I made it out. I started laughing in happiness.

Before we can celebrate more though, a bunch of bad people dressed in black stepped out from behind the trees leveling guns on us.

I look at Mike who looks like he's about to run into them to fight and feel my heart skip a beat.

I will not let my friends die here.

I reach out with my mind and take hold of each of their necks. With a quick flick of my head I simultaneously snap each of them. As they drop to the ground I drop to my knees, dizziness threatening to overwhelm me.

"Mike..." I start to say but he is already picking me up princess style like he has before and I know I can trust him to keep me safe.

Thank you.

Denise's P.O.V.

I could not make sense of what I was seeing. The decaying buildings, trees and road I could understand. The faintly toxic air, I could also understand.

The two demigod-like beings fighting over it all I could not understand.

They were obviously swinging highly destructive energies back and forth at each other, striking and parrying causing massive damage to the landscape below them. Neither one seemed to be gaining the upper hand.

I stood watching the battle mesmerized before one of my Hunters stated the obvious.

"I can find no trace of the target Master."

Suddenly the ringing was back. I groan knowing this could only be...

I AM CURRENTLY FIGHTING YOUR ENEMY. SOON HE WILL RETREAT. YOU WILL REMAIN BEHIND TO SHARE IN MY POWER AND BECOME SOMETHING GREATER THAN YOURSELVES.

For some reason I find myself drawn into this being. The darkness bleeding off it was intoxicating. There was suddenly no question about our next course of action. We will become stronger for this.

The angelic looking being broke off and flew towards us with a look of genuine surprise. My Hunters raised their weapons but then lowered them when I gave the gesture.

"Come away from here with me sister."

Yep. That was him.

"No." I answer calmly.

"No?" He sounds incredulous.

"No." I confirm. "We'll be staying here."

He is silent before a saddened look reaches his features.

"Are you sure? The company you will keep here will not be merciful."

My annoyance was starting to rise.

"The choice is made. Now begone or make us leave."

He just stared at us with pity before heading to the still open portal.

I grin up at my new master before he speaks again.

GOOD. NOW LET YOUR TRAINING BEGIN.

6. Making Arrangements

Two days later

Mortifer's P.O.V.

"Alright everyone. I called you all in here so that we could settle some matters regarding Eleven."

I met all of the adults' gazes trying to gauge their moods and thoughts. Well, I guess I could just reach into their minds to figure it out, but that seemed a little impolite.

Joyce and Hopper sat next to each other. The three other families' parents sat respectfully as well.

"What matters?" Hopper asks with a hint of suspicion to which I address with one of my bright smiles.

"Where she lives of course." I start. "And with whom. So first off who is willing?"

I am greeted to a near simultaneous round of 'we ares' and 'I am's.'

Gotta admit, I didn't expect that.

"Why?" I question.

Karen Wheeler speaks up. "She saved all our little boys, we owe this to her." Everyone nods in agreement to this.

I'm stare for a couple seconds with surprise plain on my features, and then recompose myself.

"Alright then. Who are the closest ones to her?"

After a brief discussion they settle on the Wheelers, because of their son, Joyce and Hopper.

"Who is financially able, and most likely to provide a healthy environment for her to grow up?"

I see Hopper look down. I've seen that look a thousand times before. The look you got when you believed yourself to be unworthy.

Joyce looked like she wanted to speak but didn't. I had already estimated her family's financial strength and come to to find it less than adequate. Not that money is everything, but if a more suitable candidate was ready to step up...

Ted and Karin Wheeler's gazes were directed right at me, confirming what I had already guessed.

Ted had come around to the entire situation once I showed him, in secret, Eleven's past via psychic link. Now he was quite disillusioned

but, in my opinion, he was all the better for it.

"It is decided then." I speak. "You Wheelers shall bring her up the way she always should have been with all the love and guidance your family can muster. Are we all in agreement?" There are several 'yes's' and grunts of affirmation.

I smile wider now. "Good. I will aid you as much as I can with such endeavors. You all will have nothing to fear for the next eight or ten years."

It was their turn to stare at me in surprise.

"Thank you Mortifer." Joyce said slowly. "But if you don't mind me asking for all of us," she gestures around, "what happens in the next eight or ten years?"

My smile disappears, replaced by an expression of solemnity. Everyone notices and I can see nervousness starting to form in their minds. I want to calm them but can't think of how to without lying.

"Before this last venture into the Upside-down..."

"Which you didn't have the good grace to tell us was taking place." Hopper cut in. "With two of the boys I might add."

I look him straight in the eyes and wait a couple seconds before saying.

"Would you have let it happen otherwise?"

"Not the same way. A few of us could have come with them for support. Guns and all."

I sigh. "Exactly. You would have wanted to take on the primary role, when in this case I could only help if Mike was the one spearheading the whole endeavor."

"Why?" He asks obviously confused and irritated.

"Because those are the rules."

"What rules?"

"I may not interfere with such a destiny or binding. Mike and El made a promise to each other before she last disappeared and when kids make promises there is no breaking them. This combined with their fledgling bond which will one day mature into something else entirely made it obvious. It is their destinies to continuously save each other."

Everyone was silent, again not knowing what to say to something like that. I take a deep breath and continue with the previous subject.

"As I was saying before," I continue, "before this last venture to the Upside-down, the dimension was indeed dangerous as well as toxic, but without any sense of coordination or semblance of focused

aggression."

I pause, considering whether or not to withhold any information but decide against it.

"This will soon no longer be the case." I state.

"Wh-what?" Joyce stutters as everyone else stares at me with wide eyes.

"An Old One, or rather, a hyper powerful being has taken up residence in the Upside-down, and it won't be long before it starts shaping the very dimension along with its inhabitants to its will."

"How?.."

I shrug. "Not really sure. I don't tend to try and bend things to my will so I couldn't tell ya."

"Can you kill it?" Hopper spoke up causing everyone to stare back and forth between us with inquiring expressions. "If we help you, can you kill it?"

I mull over this in my head for a good few moments.

"Maybe. But I will not seek a final conclusion until said years pass."

"Because?"

"Destiny. Redemption."

"For who?"

"Those who are lost right now."

"Could you be less cryptic?"

"Not today." I smirk. "The Old One will develop champions as time goes on. I will need some of my own once the time expires."

"We could help with that." Joyce suggests. Everyone looks at her incredulously. "What? Wouldn't it be a plus to be able to defend our kids?"

Everyone seemed to begrudgingly agree with Karin saying, "Fair enough."

"Thank you." I pause before going on knowing what I have to say next may be ill received. "But I am afraid you all will not be enough. I will have to train the teens and pre-teens so that they may also have a part in defending themselves."

"What?" Karin asks with a dangerous glint in her eyes.

I swallow knowing it is barely ever wise to rouse a mother's anger. "Think of it as self defense training taken to a new level. If they are not willing I will not press the matter. I will also wait at least two years before so much as bringing it up. They will still have time to be kids."

After a long silence Hopper spoke up again. "Maybe we should put

this subject on hold for a later time."

Grateful for the out provided, I smile. "A sound idea indeed. Unto the last subject for today. Please remain here in this building for another two days so I can ensure the safety of your families."

"Okay. But how do you intend to do that?" Karin asked.

A feral grin comes to me, causing a multitude of raised eyebrows.

"One way or another."

Eleven's P.O.V.

I can not stop smiling as I watch the boys argue over something about Star Wars.

It had only been a couple days since I got back and I was still soaking in the warm feeling that came around being with my friends.

They had no idea how happy I was to be back with them. I look over at Mike who was smiling too, his eyes meet mine and my heart starts to beat faster.

Weird. I wonder if something is wrong with me. Maybe I'll ask Nancy or Morty about it later.

"Hey El! Did you kill any more monsters in the Upside-down?" Dustin asks excitedly.

"Dustin!" Mike scolds, looking out for my feelings, same as always. But it was okay, I face Dustin and try to look brave.

"Yes."

"So cool!" Dustin exclaims.

"You kidding? I bet she was running the joint." Lucas says. "Right El?"

I remember all of the demogorgen's kin chasing me and suddenly feel so little and cold. I shake my head looking down.

"Oh." Lucas seemed to understand. "You don't have to tell us but how did you manage to avoid all the monsters?"

The memory of Morty landing in front of me for the first time flickers through my mind calming me a bit.

"Morty." I say.

All of them go wide eyed.

"You mean the guy with the fiery eyes?" Will asked.

I nod slowly, remembering when he had shown me that he could look like two completely different things. One normal, the other grey with wings.

"Wow. He must be strong." Will said, then paused. "Well stronger

than what we've already seen."

I look at all of them questionably.

"Already seen?"

"Oh yeah!" Dustin says excitedly. "You weren't there for that. Well, we were all about to get killed by the bad men and then suddenly he was there kicking all their asses!"

"It was pretty cool." Lucas agreed.

So he had saved me *and* my friends? How would I ever be able to express how grateful I was to him?

I smiled at their exciting story. "Sounds cool." I say happily.

"Yeah," Mike chimes in, "he helped us come get you too. Told us how to and everything."

"He punched me in the stomach too." Will grumbles but his eyes were smiling.

"Punched you?" I ask curiously.

He smiles wide. "Yeah. To get me to cough up another slug though. It worked as you remember, so it was worth it."

I return his smile but I'm still confused. "Will, why coughing up slugs?"

Silence reigned in the room. I can tell I asked a bad question. I look down.

Will clears out his throat. "It's okay El." He says gently. "The Upside-down did something to me, and now I puke up slugs from the Upside-down. When I do I briefly go there and then come back."

I stare at him with wide eyes. How could he bear to go through that again and again?

I have really strong friends.

I want to help him but I'm not sure I'm able to just yet.

He shakes it off, quickly smiling again. "Anyway, I'm gonna see what our awesome protector has in mind for dinner. Dustin, Lucas join me?"

Both boys get up to join him without question.

"You guys need two more?" Mike asks.

"Nah that's alright," Will says with an odd expression on his face. "You guys can catch up."

And just like that they leave us alone in the room together.

I smile, happy to finally have some private time with Mike.

"Mike..." I start but am quickly cut off by his sudden hug. The warmth envelopes me as I return his embrace. We stay like that for awhile, neither wanting to let go.

"I missed you." He whispers.

"I missed you too." I softly whisper back, feeling warm from my head to my toes. We pull away and look each other in the eyes. His eyes are as kind and cherishing as I remember.

"El. I'm glad you're back." He says, a big smile forming on his face, one that I can't help but return as I say, "Me too."

I want to say more, but I notice his face getting slightly closer to mine. Heart pounding, I start to lean in too, until I feel his warm breath on my face and...

"Howdy you two...oh" A familiar voice almost stutters.

We both shoot apart and look at the one whom had spoken. I can feel my cheeks burning for some reason.

Morty stood there, in his normal form, at the doorway, looking really guilty for some reason. He suddenly let his body sag for a moment while he said ruefully, "Man, I never thought I'd be the one to interrupt a kiss."

Mike looked down as I stared at him in question. Then I turned back to Morty.

"What is...a kiss?" I ask.

Morty's eyebrows shoot up, with a hint of a teasing smile. "Really Mike?"

Mike looks up. "Wh-what?" He stammers seeming to turn even more red, should I be worried?

"You were going to kiss her a *second* time without even explaining to her what a kiss is and the implications of that thereof?

Mike just sat there, speechless. I reach out and grab his hand, looking at him with curiosuty.

"Mike?"

He looks at me, opens his mouth, but nothing comes out. What's wrong? Why can't Mike speak? I look at Morty, concern apparent in my eyes.

He only chuckles. "Don't worry El. Mike's just fine. He's just a little embarrassed is all."

"Embarrassed?" There is so much I have yet to learn.

Morty considers the question. "I'll explain it to you after dinner, along with the concept of kissing. Perhaps, I will have Nancy provide a second opinion on that one. One an earthy perspective, and another one less so." He shrugs and turns to leave. "Anyway, come on you two."

We both get up and follow him to what they call the 'dining room.'

Mortifer's P.O.V.

After letting everyone get well into their meals I bring up the subject that has no doubt been on the young ones' minds.

"By the way everyone, where is El going to stay?" I ask innocently, throwing a wink at the adults who exchange small smiles.

"Hard to say." Hopper started off, playing along. "I mean I'm hardly a role model."

At this time I noticed the young ones getting worried looks in their eyes. Especially El.

"I could take her in." Joyce volunteered.

"That is most gracious Ms. Byers." I reply. "But I understand your current situation with your house may prove...problematic."

Joyce sat back, doing a fine job of looking defeated. I had to fight back a smile.

"Also, Sinclairs, Hendersons, if you think of rising to the occasion, to her right now I'm afraid to say you are strangers. Apologies if saying so offends you, but please, withhold such suggestions."

"None taken." Replies Mr. Sinclair.

"Same." Adds Mr. Henderson.

At this time the kids look like they're about to lose it.

"Mom, dad, please." Mike pleads. "Let her stay with us, she saved all our lives. I know it'd be asking a lot but I'll do whatever it takes to make it even. Anything."

El looks back between Mike and his mother despairingly. It's as if she's already concluded she's a burden and no one would want to take her in.

Mrs. Wheeler, to her credit, doesn't crack, and throws on a 'don't be silly' face. "Now Mike, I'm not really sure if..." She lets the words hang in the air.

We make eye contact and I give her a slight nod. The next moment we are all laughing. The kids look at us in confusion. Mrs. Wheeler speaks up first. "Mike of course we will take her in, we'd love to."

"Wh-what?" Mike stutters, still incomprehending of what just transpired.

"El will stay with us and become part of the family. We were all just playing a joke on you guys. Sorry."

Realization dawned on all their faces and next they were laughing the same as we were. Except El, who looked at us all with equal

confusion and hope.

I lean over to her and say softly. "They all wanted to take you in El. They love you for saving their boys. I practically had to lay down the law to get them to agree." Her smile was heart melting and her eyes were watering a little. The next instant she was giving me a hug, which was highly unexpected. Once I recovered from my shock I returned it in kind.

"Thank you." She said.

"Not a problem." I say back a little awkwardly. I tend to have a difficult time handling thank you's for some reason. I release her and notice a questioning light in her eyes.

"Um..." she starts, curiously lighting her eyes. "Morty, what is love?"

I throw a smirk at Mike, who blushes and turns away, before turning to Nancy. "Hey Nancy. Could I have your assistance once dinner is complete?"

Nodding with a faint look of surprise she says, "Yeah, of course."

After Nancy and I had thoroughly explained to Eleven the most important matters regarding love, kissing and embarrassment, I made ready to depart.

"Where are you heading off to?" Nancy asks nonchalantly.

I pause, choosing how to best answer before settling on blatant honesty. "I am going to go threaten this nation's most powerful men and women. After I'll see if there are any other survivors of that accursed lab." I say the last part, unbiddenly, with a snarl.

She just stares at me for a solid five seconds before smiling a little too widely.

"Well good hunting! It seems like you have a long night ahead of you." She says, humor touching her eyes along with a healthy amount amount of shock at my statement.

I smile a bit, already focusing on the task at hand as I walk through the front door. I shift to my greyer, more angelic looking form before turning around to say a last goodbye, only to witness Nancy gawking in wonder at me. El, in the next room behind her stops and smiles wide at me, seeing me how she first came to know me.

I raise my hand in a slight wave, then hurl myself upwards into the night.

Nancy's P.O.V.

I just stood staring at the spot where Mortifer had been a second earlier, replaying the whole scene in my mind.

Well holy shit.

El had told us, but to actually see it...

The girl aforementioned, walked up and grabbed my hand from behind me finally shaking me out of my reverie.

"Where'd Morty go?" She asks.

"He went to make sure we all end up safe." I answer. Noting the slight fear in her eyes. "What is it El?" I ask, using the nickname my brother had given her.

"Coming back?" She asks hesitantly.

"Of course!" I quickly assure her. "He wouldn't just leave us behind like that. Especially you. You can tell he obviously loves you."

Confusion knits across her face. "Love?" She inquires.

Remembering the whole discussion we had just had I clarify. "Like a guardian, or a friend." She nods, accepting this, but I can almost hear the next question before she even asks it.

"Does Mike...love me?" Her voice becomes a whisper as she looks down in what she now knows to be embarrassment.

Feeling a slight teasing smile come to me I simply answer, "Yeah. Of course he does."

She smiles brightly for second, melting my heart, before frowning again and asking the second question I knew was coming.

"In what..." She struggles to find the word. "Way?" She finishes.

Hoo boy. Wasn't that the million dollar question?

My expression neutral I kneel down to look her in the eye and ask, "In what way do you want him to?"

Her eyes go a little wide and her face turns several shades darker than it already had been. "...I..." She starts but gives up. I take pity on her and take over.

"It's already clear he loves you as a friend, but let me tell you, I've lived with my brother for over twelve years and never seen him look at someone, or care for someone the way he does with you."

She looks at me, her eyes shining, before saying thank you.

"Just maybe wait a little bit before you ask him yourself though okay?" I suggest. I see her belatedly nod. "He might die of embarrassment." I add.

Her eyes widen with terror, and after a moment I realize why. Holding my hands up I quickly amend. "He won't actually die. It's just an expression." She seems to relax a little at my explanation. I walk

us over back to the others. But before we rejoin them I turn to El and ask.

"El, do you have a crush on Mike?"

Her profusely blushing face is all the answer I need.

Denise's P.O.V.

I plunge my blades into the guard with a grin, feeling the satisfaction that always accompanies drawing first blood.

Wretching my blades out with one fluid movement, I sheath one in favor of drawing my handheld firearm, and put an incendiary round right between my next target's eyes. I savor the crumpling of his weak body for a moment before searching for more prey. I'm only able to find a few though as the rest of my cadre make quick work of the scientists, along with the rest of the guards.

Surveying the scene of death around me I couldn't help but smile at our handiwork. They hadn't stood half a chance.

Some static could be heard via my ear piece before a, "Master."

"Speak." I reply without hesitation.

"We found one of the subjects the Overlord specified. Awaiting further instruction."

"Hang tight. I'm heading to your location."

After weaving through a couple of the building's hallways, I met up with one of my cadre leaders, Clara, and asked for a report.

"Subject is in the room." She summarized. "Seems reluctant to come out. Given that we don't know the extent of its abilities I have not sought to reach out much. You always did have a more...adequate approach to such things."

I nod, noting the subtle flattery. Well, I guess it can't be called flattery if it's true. My manipulative abilities often proved formidable, so putting on the most savior like look I could I took a breath and walked into the room.

It was sparse, having only a bed, toilet, and sink. The subject, a young female, was curled up in a ball atop the bed, clutching what appeared to be a stuffed animal.

She looks up at me in panic. Seeming to focus on me strangely before I spoke.

"Hey, hey, it's okay." I say sootheningly. "We have taken care of the bad guys, and are here to save you."

The subject regarded me with what I knew well to be distrust.

Rightly so. Yet, I knew ultimately what its decision would be.

"Come, take my hand, and let me lead you from this place." I urge patiently holding out my hand.

The subject stares at me for what seems like hours but in all actuality was probably only a couple minutes before finally getting up and slowly taking my hand.

I smile down at her benevolently, making sure the smile reaches my eyes, and lead her out of the building to the portal we had come out of.

I sense her trepidation so I stop in front of the portal to console her. Not necessarily out of what some would call decency, but to make sure she didn't try and make a break for it.

"Hey does your teddy have a name?" I ask softly.

"Ci-Cindy." The child sputters.

"Cindy." I echo. "That's a good name. What about your's?"

"Ten." The girl says, and shows me the brand on her arm confirming as much.

"Well Ten. I need you to be brave for me okay?" The girl vigorously nods.

Assured that she is unlikely to run I walk us both through the portal.

Well, that was easy.

7. Negotiations

Mortifer's P.O.V.

I land in front of the White House in a slightly over dramatic fashion. Can I get a little carried away sometimes, yes. But hey, what are you gonna do? To begin I survey the area with my normal and psychic senses which reveals there to be many guards and secret weapons in the vicinity. Some of the said guards are already aware of my presence and seem to be taking up position. One makes his position known and raises his voice to me.

"Identify yourself and state your purpose!"

Understandably confrontational. Little does he know that he has no leverage to make such demands, but regardless it couldn't hurt to humor him.

"I am known as Mortifer the Grey Angel." I say, using my psychic abilities to amplify my voice. "I am here to have a word with your higher ups. Please pass word of this to them so that we can wrap this up in a timely manner."

There is silence for a couple moments before I hear them, despite the distance, relay the message, and debate how to best neutralize me if the need should arise.

I can't help but chuckle at this.

We all wait in relative silence for a response, until I see the one who spoke out step forth again but seeming a little hesitant.

"Your request has been denied. Now leave at once!"

Well, it's not as though I'd expected a different outcome. Still, I'll give them a chance to simply not interfere as I take a step forward.

"Stop!"

I take another stride, heedless of his warnings. Then another, at which time I hear him speak quietly into what I can only assume is their comms. "Take the shot."

I feel the sniper I always knew was there squeeze the trigger. Without pause bring my wing up and am gratified with feeling the high caliber round disintegrate upon making contact.

That was a mistake. None of you will get the chance to make another.

Tightening my grip on their minds, I make one quick dismissing gesture with my hand and simultaneously rip them all out of

consciousness. After hearing all of them hit the ground I calmly precede forward as though nothing of import had transpired.

Sometimes I think I'm too powerful for my own good. This was one of those times. But, I suppose that's why I have the rules afterall. I slip through the hallways, stepping over the bodies of those I had rendered unconscious and use my powers to make short work of any obstacle that stood in my way.

It took me maybe five minutes.

Now standing before the final doorway, quite a hefty one I might add, I consider my best approach.

I had left this room untouched by my power for two reasons. One: I needed to speak with the people in it. Two: I felt a touchstone of power in one of the individuals within the room. My interest was peaked, but my objective the same.

Well might as well get this over with.

I pry the door open with my psychic might. It's not hard, but it's not exactly easy either. As it tears from its locking mechanisms and flies open I can feel all the bullets come flying at me with a suddenness that may have bested even the most adept assassins.

My Gift, however, has long since been in affect. So, without pause I simply brought my wings to bear and absorb their firepower. Did I have to? No. But a display of power could prove useful in a time like this.

Once they exhaust their magazines I am amongst them, delivering incapacitating blows left and right. I make sure to not severely maim or do anything lethal. This was simply due to the fact I have no wish to incite vengeance and hatred in their hearts.

So, after rendering the last armed opponent a non-threat, I slowly rise up to address the supposed men and women of authority.

What I do not expect is a formidable wave of psychic energy to smash into me.

Caught off my guard I am sent crashing through one of the room's heavily fortified walls.

Ow.

After cursing and taking a few moments to recompose myself as well as rise back to my full height. I bring more of my defenses to bear. Just in case.

Huh. This must kind of be what the Old One felt like when I first blasted him with one of my own psychic bolts.

"Well done Eight." One of the men spoke.

Eight?

One of the eleven is here?

Of course, how could I expect anything less?

I stride through the dust left behind from the wall's destruction. The moment I come into view I can feel the one known as 'Eight' making ready to send another wall of psychic energy my way. I, however, am ready for this one. Meeting them power for power I let them press with all the will they can muster, taking stock of the wellspring they currently had at their disposal. It was...oddly impressive, but once I feel them reach their peak I crush them. Their psychic will that is, and force them to their knee.

The changing of facial expressions is almost comical on the others upon seeing their final line of defense so thoroughly overwhelmed.

"Now then." I say, with a hint of vexation touching my voice. "Will you kindly accept my *request* to talk on matters of import?"

They all look at each other in disbelief. Before the lead male spoke up. "After some reconsideration we have decided the wisest course of action would be to hear you out." His tone is calm, but I can feel the fear radiating off him. How terribly odd this must seem to them. An angel like being appearing and demanding an audience. I would barely be containing my trepidation if I were in their shoes.

"Indeed." I state flatly. "You are the president I presume?"

"I am."

"Good. What do you know about Hawkins, Indiana?"

He seems to scrap his mind for information but soon gives up.

"I'm afraid not much."

"Then I will have to enlighten you. All of you. Take my hand Mr. President. Everyone else hold onto him."

Everyone pauses. Unsure of themselves.

"Sometime today." I urge. It's hard to contain my sarcasm as I speak, but I extend my hand to the president nonetheless, who after a brief hesitation, reaches out to take it.

After I see the rest of them reluctantly place their hands on the president's shoulders, I send all the memories and data I have about the lab flooding into their minds. The experiments, the kidnapped children and the new horrid dimension that had been exposed. In real time, it only took about five minutes.

Once it was finished I withdrew the connection and was a little surprised to see tears in all of their eyes. Some obvious, others not so.

"Did you know?" I speak quietly.

They all seemed to shake their heads.

"No. We would never have allowed this." The president answered, disgust evident in his voice.

Whether or not that is true is hardly my concern at the moment.

"Then help me bring good out of it." I say.

"How?"

"Leave Hawkins and the new threat to me. I will tend to the those affected by this unacceptable situation, and ensure the enemy does the same. I will also require your assistance with paperwork before long."

There is a pause as the president turns to his advisors seeking input.

"Can we have a few moments to talk this over amongst ourselves?"

"Yes. But remain in my line of sight." I concede. "I have little trust in you."

"Thank you."

They make their way to the other end of the room. I finally take a moment to analyze Eight. Another small girl, short hair, and with haunted eyes. Similar to El, but no where near identical. I release my psychic grip on her and allow her to move freely again.

She almost falls over before she realizes she now has control of her limbs again. She slowly gets to her feet and looks at me with both awe and terror.

"What are you?" She says, just a mere whisper.

Hm...that question sounds familiar.

I kneel down so that we are near eye level and smile warmly.

"I am Mortifer. But you can call me Morty if you like."

Her eyes seem to light up a little at this. "Morty." Her voice is so small. "I'm...Eight."

"I am happy to have found you Eight." I say brightly. "Would you like me to take you away from here?" I ask.

"A-away?" She seems confused.

"Yes. You can come live with good people, and myself. We will take care of you and love you as you have never known. No one will hurt you like they did in that lab ever again."

She seems deep in thought for a few moments before giving an answer.

"Yes." She whispers, her eyes shining.

My smile only grows at her response.

"Then you will leave with me once this is all done."

Just as I finished saying that the president and his little group made their way back over to us.

"We will offer any assistance we can." The president starts. "But how do we know you will not come back to strike at us or even that you'll succeed in your task?"

"My word." I reply without pause. "I give my word, and my word is proof."

There is a short silence as I wait to see if anyone dares to challenge my honor. They seem to decide not to. The president just nods in affirmation.

"I'll take my leave now. Soon I will send word asking for that which you vowed to aid me with."

"Very well." The president replies simply.

I begin walking to the doorway but stop, and turn to face Eight, extending my hand in welcome.

"Come." I say gently. "Don't be afraid. It's time to go. Just like we talked about, okay?"

It's the first smile I see on Eight's face as she hesitantly strides forward, almost disbelieving of what's actually happening, and places her little hand in mine.

The adults look like they want to say something but decide against it.

Wise choice.

And with that I lead Eight out of the White House I had so thoroughly infiltrated.

A full night I think.

Yes. Definitely a full night.

Mike's P.O.V.

"It's gonna be so great to have you living with us El!" I can't help but exclaim to my very precious friend.

El just smiles that smile of hers that never ceases to make me want to just stare.

We are currently just walking down the hallways of this lodge catching up while we can before everything picks up.

"Mike?" She says quietly.

"Yeah?" I say enthusiastically.

"Thank you."

My brow furrows. "For what?"

Suddenly she's hugging me, which I instantly return, but I can't seem to stop the blush from coming as per usual nowadays.

"For keeping your promise." She whispers into my ear.

It takes a few moments for my brain to formulate a response.

"You too." I say, my voice dry. "You came back to me. To us I mean."

She pulls away and seems to be a little red. I instinctively gently place the back of my hand on her forehead to check her temperature.

"El, are you feeling alright?" I ask in concern, now knowing prolonged exposure to the Upside-down could leave its damage. "You feel kind of warm."

"It's okay." She mutters looking down.

"You sure?"

She nods and says softly. "Just happens a lot when I'm with you. I don't mind."

I had to do a double take on those words for a moment before my face also flushed red. This was the longest sentence I ever heard her utter. She noticed my embarrassment and smiled all the wider.

"Mike, pretty." She teased

I had to laugh a little at this.

"For boys the word is cute."

"Then you are cute." She continues.

I'm not sure my face could possibly get more red at this point.

"T-thanks El." I stutter. "You're pretty too."

Just then we hear commotion in the room beside us. A shifting of furniture along with grunts and moans can be heard. The voices sound oddly familiar.

El recognizes them before I do.

"Nancy, Jonathan." She exclaims, worry in her eyes. "Need help."

She looks like she's ready to tear open the door to make sure they're alright. I cannot let that happen, for so many reasons, so I quickly take step in front of her to make sure it she gets the picture.

She looks at me in confusion as I speak up.

"El. I know this sounds weird but trust me, you don't need to worry about those two. They are actually probably having a *really* good time together right now." I could probably vomit right now.

She seems to ease up a bit, and I take the opportunity to drag her away from the door.

"How?" She asks, and I know exactly what she means. I turn a bit red again before answering.

"They are doing something that older couples like to do when they get the chance."

"Couples..." She murmurs.

"Oh right, couples are..."

"Nancy and Morty told me." She interjected.

"Oh great." I breathe. Secretly relieved I didn't have to explain that concept to her.

She seems to still wanna say something but can't bring herself to voice it out loud.

"El?"

She looks at me. "Yes Mike?"

"You can tell me anything, okay?"

She pauses but manages to get some words out. "We...in the school...before...we...we..."

Oh. Crap. I was hoping to have more time before we talked about *that*. Well, I suppose now is as good a time as any. Still I audibly gulped.

"You mean when I...kissed you?" I ask quietly.

She turns red but keeps looking at me.

"Yes. Why?"

It was as if all the air is suddenly missing from the world. Taking more than a few moments I manage to muster up enough courage to just say it.

"W-w-well. It's like I said El, I *like* you.

She seemed a tad confused so I tried to clarify.

"I mean, I kind of have a crush on you..." I trail off, the heat in my cheeks never leaving.

I saw a flicker of understanding cross her features.

"You have...a crush...on me?" She asks with disbelieving wide eyes.

"Well yeah." I reply awkwardly. "But it doesn't matter right now. All that matters is that we stick together and catch you up on everything you've been missing out on all this time."

She smiles a bit, but still seems a little deep in thought about something. I guide us back to the others, but before we rejoin them I stop in front of the doorway turning to face El again.

"Hey El?"

"Yes?" She says, snapping out of her thoughts.

"Don't worry if you don't have a crush on me too. I mean, we will always be friends no matter what. You're really important to me."

With that I walk through the doorway to the others before giving

her a chance to respond.

Joyce's P.O.V.

I couldn't help but smile as I looked on at the youngins having fun. They were just so filled with joy, especially now that Eleven had been recovered.

Us adults were just exchanging stories over again and making plans to help Eleven together. Obviously she would need someone with her a lot of the time in the beginning since she always seemed like she'd be close to a panic attack whenever we would so much as go to put a door between her and everyone else.

Whatever they'd done to her in the lab was unforgivable, but maybe, with time, she would heal.

Guess we're just lucky that Mortifer showed up to save the day, and all of us by extension. He seems to be a rather odd fellow, not even just physically speaking. Even when his eyes aren't burning with that cold white fire they are gleaming with a peculiar combination of compassion and authority.

Speaking of which, he was still out doing...whatever it is Nancy said he was gonna do. Something about talking to high government officials and checking out the lab for any survivors.

I wonder if he'll find anyone.

More to the point, I wonder if he'll find anyone like Eleven.

Wouldn't that be crazy?

I look back at the youngins and realize that I don't see Jonathan or Nancy.

I take the sudden panic I feel and shove it down for the moment.

"Hey kids." I call. They turn to me. "Have you guys seen Jonathan and Nancy?"

They all seem to develop knowing smiles, and I almost don't even need to hear the answer at this point.

"They're just hanging out Ms. Byers." Mike answers.

"Doing couple stuff." El clarifies, at which point there is a round of 'ew's' from the boys.

"Thank you." I say with a smile. Hm...well as long as my son doesn't do anything stupid then it should be just fine, and I know I can trust him.

I sigh, heading back to the others when I hear it again.

All is well. Head back to your homes. I will contact you again in person

within the next couple days.

I look at the adults to see if any had noticed. None had. I turn my gaze to the kids instead and see Will and Eleven with wide eyes.

Interesting.

Regardless, looks like it's up to me to pass the message along.

8. New Names. New friend.

Dustin's P.O.V.

Things seemed to be going normally so far since the incident. The most recent one that is. No government bad guys had showed up and all was as well as could be expected with Eleven.

I can't help but grin as I remember how cheerful Mike has been ever since her return. That smile almost never leaves his face.

On that note, it has never been more fun teasing Mike than ever before. Even Eleven is already starting to understand enough about the concept. Soon, hopefully, we'll be able to tease her too. All in friendship of course.

While those thoughts are flying through my brain I hear a knock downstairs.

Footsteps, my mother's footsteps, made their way to the front door. I can only hear muffled chatter, before she calls me.

"Dustin! Get down here!"

I sigh, forcing myself to get up out of bed and head down the stairs. Before I get downstairs though, I stop dead in my tracks upon seeing who was there waiting.

Mortifer, the one whom I'd seen move faster than several trained government assassins at once, stood there smiling warmly at whatever my mom was saying. Noticing I was present he turned his gaze to me causing me to suddenly swallow audibly. He chuckled.

"There's no reason to be nervous Dustin." He said reassuringly. "I only mean you and your family well."

I heard his words, believed them even, because only truth could be seen in his eyes, yet still my legs did not move.

My mom laughed. "Come on Dustin." She teased. "Is that any way to treat the one who saved all our lives?"

Mortifer looked momentarily uncomfortable and muttered something along the lines of, 'it was no trouble.'

But that was all I needed to snap me out of whatever I was in. I rushed down those steps and gave our new friend a big hug, at which point he seemed oddly surprised, but then just chuckled while half heartedly returning it.

I step back and begin my usual bombardment of questions. What? I have questions.

"Sir, if you don't mind my asking, how did you do all the things you did?" I ask excitedly.

"Immense psychic power along with something else."

"So you can do it at any time?"

"That's right."

"Can you show me something right now?" I inquire, unable to contain my enthusiasm. I half expect my mom to scold me for asking but she looks a little curious too. Mortifer just tilts his head a little to one side and remains silent. I remember how El only uses her powers when it's necessary and am about to tell him it's okay if he doesn't want to when he smiles mischievously.

"Dustin?" He prompts.

"Yeah?"

"Look down."

I do and am shocked, as well as thrilled to see that I am no longer on the ground.

"Wicked!" I exclaim as I look at my mom who smiles back at me. After a few moments he sets me back down and turns back to my mom.

"Mrs. Henderson, would you mind if I borrowed your son for a couple hours?" He requests in an overly elegant way.

"Um...sure." She says hesitantly. "But what will you two be doing?"

He smiles again. "I want to introduce him to an upcoming new friend his age. I believe he possesses a wonderful sense of humor that could be used to great effect in this case."

My mom looks at me to see if I was on board. Not that she had to.

"Can I mom?" I ask grinning.

"Yes, but be back before eight." She commands. She gives a pointed expression to Mortifer who just nods ever so slightly.

"You got it." I say trying to contain my excitement. Mortifer, gestures for me to follow him outside. We make our way to the woods, before I speak up.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"Back to the lodge, but I needed to make sure we wouldn't be tracked or seen." He pauses, then makes a brief sweeping gesture with his hand. The next moment reality seems to blur right in front of him. He looks back at me and holds out his hand.

Well, why not?

I grasped his hand and let him lead me through the blurry area...

We re-emerge right in front of the lodge, which, by the way, still looked cool as hell. I was about to head in when he grabbed my shoulder.

"Alright Dustin." He began. "You and the boys found Eleven, but let me ask you, have you ever thought about her name and the implications thereof?"

I looked at him in confusion. What was so odd about Eleven's name. I mean other than it was a number...

Oh.

He saw the realization dawn in my eyes and continued.

"Well I have found one of the other ten." My jaw dropped. "She is Eight, and I sense she could really use a good humored friend her age such as yourself."

Well, he really didn't have to say anything more, I was fully on board.

"Sir, I would love to be that friend of her's." I state, barely containing my excitement. I see his smile widen.

"Good. Let's go in then."

We entered the awesome lodge before he told me to wait a second while he went to prep Eight a bit so she wasn't blindsided. In the meantime I took in my surroundings, my eyes landing on the long blade that hung on the wall.

I wonder when I'll be able to hold a weapon like that.

Mortifer walks back in and gestures me forward. But, before I pass the threshold to the next room he stops me.

"I will be in the room adjacent. Let me know if you two need anything." He paused a second. "Do not tell her about Eleven yet."

Huh? What? Why? My expression must have said it all because he just said, "Trust me."

Well, he *had* saved all our lives so I suppose I could take his word on this. I nod and head into the next room.

She was waiting for me on one of the sofas. She seemed to have short hair too, though not as short as El's and was relatively the same size. She had blonder looking hair, but her eyes, while being blue instead, had the same timid look that El had before she warmed up to us. Her attire consisted of a white dress, which I have to admit, she wore quite well.

What? I can't say people look good when they actually look good?

She seemed to be waiting for me to say something so I took the initiative.

"Hi, I'm Dustin."

Eleven's P.O.V.

Now this, I could certainly get used to.

I can't help but smile as I observe the still sleeping Mike, curled up at my side. Last night I'd had a nightmare and reached out to Mike. He was kind and understanding as always. After a bit of story telling on his part I had calmed down and we had drifted off to sleep.

So, now it was morning, and I was just staring at him sleeping. He looked so breakable, or vulnerable might be the better word, making me feel an intense desire to protect him, as he has protected me, from anything that wanted to hurt him.

After a while, Nancy came down the stairs, looking ready to say something, and just stopped dead when she saw us. Or, to be more precise, when she saw me softly playing with Mike's hair.

"Um Eleven?" She whispered so as not to wake Mike. I hummed in response.

"One sec. I'll be right back." She had an odd smile on her face, but that didn't seem like a bad thing so I resumed my previous activity.

A few moments passed and I heard her come down stairs again. Before I had a chance to greet her again there was a white flash. Confused I looked up at her. She held a peculiar device that looked like the one I've seen Jonathan carry around. She just smiled sweetly and shrugged.

"Wake Mike and come upstairs for breakfast." She whispered again. I just nodded.

After she was back upstairs I took one last look at Mike's sleeping form before I grabbed his shoulder I started to shake him gently.

"Mike. Mike wake up."

He stirred but kept his eyes closed.

"Hmm...not yet El." He said still sleepily.

I laughed, and smiled at his saying my name while still trying to wake him up.

He gave in after a few seconds, finally opening his eyes to look up at me. A warm smile suddenly appeared on his slightly grumpy face and I felt my heart pick up just a bit.

"Morning El." He spoke.

"Morning Mike."

He sits up and looks around, as if finally realizing where he was, then suddenly turns to me with eyes wide and cheeks reddening.

"Hey El, did anyone see us down here? Together?"

I'm a little confused at his expression but answer. "Just Nancy I think."

He suddenly becomes pale but tries to remain calm. "Oh, where is she now?"

"Upstairs. Said to wake you up."

"I see...well let's go then."

After a bit of eating breakfast with Mike's family, which was nice by the way, Mike's mom Karin spoke up.

"So El." She started, seeming a bit cautious, which made me a little nervous. "Your identification papers just came in today."

I furrowed my brow, not understanding, and looked at Mike.

"It's like official writing that has your name, birthday, stuff like that."

Oh.

"Can I see?" I ask timidly.

"Of course." Karen smiles handing the papers to me. The first most

prominent thing I see is the name.

Elle Jane Ives.

"Elle Jane Ives." I say outloud. I look up questioningly.

"Jane Ives was your name before *they* took you." Karin clarified. "Mortifer thought you'd still want the one Mike gave you though. I'm sure if you want it changed though he can..." She stopped when she saw me shaking my head.

"Elle is good." I say firmly, and look to see Mike smiling.

"Alright. Well as of now then you are Elle Jane Ives." Karin stated with a smile and just like that everyone went back to eating.

A name.

I finally had a real name.

I was real.

Mike must have known what the look on my face said, because he leaned over and whispered.

"You were always real. You always mattered Elle."

His words filled me up with so much warmth and a love that I'd only recently become acquainted with.

I looked at him smiling wide, happy tears forming in the corners of my eyes, trying to think of how to thank him. For a few moments, I felt a crazy urge to kiss him, but figured I'd better not in front of his whole family. Not yet anyway. So, instead I got up out of my chair and hugged him tightly without warning. After a moment he hugged me back and we just stood there swaying a bit.

I might have seen another white flash come from Nancy's direction, but who knows?

Denise's P.O.V.

It had been nearly two weeks since I'd brought back Ten. She had

gone into training since, same as myself, and we were both progressing in very different directions.

This was primarily due to her abilities.

Telekinesis and then some.

I, on the other hand would just have to settle with being an ordinary human. For now.

Right now I was sparing against some newly resurrected monster.

Apparently, this beast had raised a considerable amount of hell on the other side before being struck down by the last of the experiments.

Subject Eleven.

Unfortunately, the Angel had fled with this particular subject in tow. No matter. In time a play would be made for it.

But for now, training was required.

I duck below another sweeping blow from the creature, utilizing my opponent's clumsiness that almost continuously left it wide open, and slash at its abdomen with my blade. Much to my disappointment the blade did not so much as penetrate the monster's skin. I roll away and avoid another series of reckless attacks at which point I raise my incendiary pistol and empty a clip into its hulking form. It bellows in pain, causing me to wonder if it was the projectile that harmed it, or the resulting brief fire.

Before I can make another move the creature is sent flying against the nearest wall, cracking the surface, but remaining pinned to it nonetheless. It lets out a screech, like it's reliving some sort of terrible memory. I grin at its mental agony despite myself and turn to greet the one responsible.

"Ah, Ten. What brings you here?" I inquire while still grinning.

The grin is returned as the little girl makes her way over to me.

"The Overlord wants to speak with you. I was told to come tell you."

"Speaking so elegantly already child?" I tease.

"The Overlord did expand my mind's vocabulary." Ten conceded.

"Good for you." I smirk. "Why did the Overlord not contact me itself?"

Ten just shrugs.

I throw one more glance at the still pinned monster and take my leave, heading towards the stronghold via the usual route. I can't help but be amazed by how much everything seems to be changing here in this twisted reality. I see monsters that would normally be at each others throats, quite literally, instead coexisting in a rather strange fashion. To me, this could only mean two things. Either the Overlord was preparing to weather an assault, or to embark on one.

Both subjects had their own intrigue.

I stare up at what my warriors are already calling, the Citadel, and take in its already impressive size, making sure to note the jagged knife-like protrusions jutting out of the walls. The Overlord had raised this place in a day for reasons unknown. I personally thought it was simply making a show of power, but one can never be sure. At this I simply enter and begin to make my way through the halls.

Each seemed nearly identical. But that was probably the point. A fortress meant to deny entry if possible, and to disorient in the case it was not.

A few minutes later I found myself in the throne room. Well, throne room is a bit much. I mean, there was an actual throne, but it was rarely occupied. The Overlord frequently directs its efforts to more pressing matters, such as reshaping and unifying this world.

This, however, was one of those rare times where the Dark One sat waiting upon its throne of black obsidian. I felt a faint ringing in my ears and knew what was coming before it happened.

MASTER OF THE DARK HUNTERS. IT IS MOST FORTUNATE YOU SHOULD ARRIVE HERE AT THIS TIME.

Slightly inclining my head to show the proper respect I responded in kind, "You did send for me, Dark One."

YES. YOU ARE TO BE THE FIRST OF MY CHAMPIONS. NOW COME AND CLAIM YOUR WEAPON.

The Dark One held out a hand, or the nearest equivalent of one, and gestured for me to step forward. I did knowing that if this thing wanted me dead, than I would already be so.

In its hand, something resembling a sword began to materialize out of seemingly nothing, until it solidified into a weapon that practically emanated wrongness. I gingerly took the blade from the Dark One's grasp, making sure not to touch the blade.

WITH THIS YOU WILL BE ABLE TO CUT DOWN THE BEFORE UNASSAILABLE AND DRAW FROM A PORTION OF MY POWER.

I look up in surprise, feeling a grin tug at my lips.

"Will I be able to strike down *him*, my lord?"

ONLY IF YOU ARE CLEVER AND FAST. NOW GO LEARN HOW TO WIELD YOUR WEAPON AND PREPARE.

"As you say, my lord." I say excitedly and start to exit the throne room.

ONCE YOU HAVE DONE THIS, I WILL SEND YOU TO FETCH SEVEN.

I nod in understanding and continue on out until I am back outside.

I look down at the sword again, feeling my grin return. This, this blade, will be the one to strike down the Angel.

Eight's P.O.V.

I laughed at another of Dustin's antics. Huh, laughing was not something I had done before today. Or, at least, not like this, so unbidden and free.

"Okay, how about this one?" He prompted and I brought my full attention to him, noting the curly hair atop his head that I really wanted to reach out and touch for some reason. I didn't, of course, since I had no idea if that would be okay or not.

"What did the right eye say to the left eye?" He asked.

I thought real hard about it for a moment before answering.

"I see you?" I guessed.

He shook his head before saying,
"Between you and me, something smells!"

I stared at him dumbfounded for a few seconds before realization dawned on me, and just like that I was laughing again.

"I like you Dustin." I manage through my laughter. He seems to turn a bit red at this before shaking it off.

"You're pretty cool too Eight."

My smile drops when he utters my name. It is a grim reminder of where I came from. He notices of course and rushes to apologize.

"Oh sorry Eight." He tries to amend and sees my face scrunch up again.

"Oooh...you don't like being called by your number, right?"

I nod, my eyes downcast.

He seems deep in thought for awhile before he speaks up again.

"Well how about we give you a real name?" He suggests smiling.

I look at him in confusion. "A real name?"

"Yeah, like let's see...right now you're Eight so how about we give you something similar, but still different?"

That sounded...good. As much as I hated to admit it, Eight would always be apart of me. But I wanted to be more than that. More than the pain. I nod slowly.

"Like what?"

"Hm..." He pauses to think for a few moments. "How about Kate? It

sounds kind of like Eight but has a totally different spelling."

"Kate." I try the word on my lips. It feels...oddly nice. "Kate." I say again letting it sink in. Kate is not bad at all. Kate could be more, more than Eight.

I can't help but smile again at my newfound name as a strange sort of happiness surges through me. My smile becomes a grin as I look at Dustin, which he returns right before I tackle him with a hug. Both of us tumble over and we can't help but break out laughing.

"Thank you." I manage through my giggles.

"You're welcome Kate."

Until now I didn't know your face could hurt from smiling too much.

Mike's P.O.V.

I wonder what's taking him so long.

I mean sure, it is the middle of the night and he said he had to make a stop. But what kind of stop delays you a full hour?

Also, it's getting chilly out here in my house's backyard. I mean seriously.

Suddenly though, as if on cue, I hear the distinct sound of wings descending and turn to see who Dustin and Lucas were already dubbing the *Grey Angel* make his entrance.

After landing eloquently, seemingly without effort, he calmly walked up to me with a welcoming smile.

"You called for me Mike?" His powerful yet kind voice resonating from him.

I swallow, suddenly very conscious of the insanely powerful person that stood before me. A person, who could probably swat away my existence the same way I could do to an insect.

"Y-yes." I choke out, irrational fear suddenly gripping me. "I-I had a question."

"Well ask away." He urges smoothly.

I gather my courage. "Y-you were going to start teaching Nancy and t-the others how to be heroes right?"

He seems momentarily taken aback by my question before he answers. "I will begin training them to be strong, cunning, and fierce when necessary, yes."

"Could you teach me too?" I ask, my voice faltering a bit.

Suddenly, he is very still, as if deep in thought. I gulp, but after a few moments his posture returns to normal and his benevolent demeanor returns.

"No, I cannot. I have your parents under the impression that I will wait a few years before I so much as bring up the subject of training to you. Now if that is all..." He makes to leave, his great wings unfolding.

"Wait!" I yell, causing him to retract his wings once more.

"Why were you late?" I blurt out, wanting to immediately smack myself in the head.

"Pardon?"

"You took a full hour longer to get here than you said..." I mumble out, then quickly go to apologize. "Not that that's not alright! I was just...wondering."

Silence again.

Then.

"I went to the lab." He said, a hint a sadness touching his features.

My mouth dropped open. "The lab?" I questioned.

"Yes." He spoke, resigning himself to explain. "I hoped to maybe recover any of the other ten young ones that came before Eleven."

My mind was whirling, I had always known Eleven's name came from the number, which implied there were those before her. But for some reason it never fully came to the forefront of my mind.

Until now.

"Did you find anyone?" I all but whisper.

His face falls. "No. Everyone, including those who actually worked there, were dead. Killed. Though I did not find any of the other ten."

"Was it the demogorgon, or other monsters from the Upside-down?" He shook his head.

"The government assassins tasked with murdering all of you." My eyes widen. "It was them. I can only assume that they were also looking for the ten. Whether they found any or not, I am uncertain."

More silence. It is a lot to take in, but it only reaffirms my reasoning to my request before.

"Mortifer?"

"Yes Mike?"

"Can you give me the chance to tell you why at least? Why I want to learn how to be strong?"

He nods after a brief hesitation.

"Because, I want to protect them. All of them. My friends, El, my family. My friends. They're amazing, most of the time, but sometimes they need a hero, someone to rally to." I pause to see if I'm having any impact, but only see his head cock a little to one side. "My family is safe but for how long? They will be strong too, I know, but one more can always make the difference. And El, you probably know how I feel about her better than I do." I admit as a blush creeps over my cheeks. "She's a real superhero. But, sometimes, even superheroes need help. So...please"

Wow, well, there it was, all cards on the table. It seemed to have actually given him cause to reconsider too...

"Watch over Eleven especially this week. She will need you." He starts walking away, causing my heart to sink a bit. Well I guess not. "Your training will begin a week from now." He continues, causing a quick smile to form. "So be ready." He unfurrowed his wings and shot into the sky with unnatural speed.

I crept back into the house, making sure to check on El.

As I peeked in, I saw El squirming and whimpering in her sleep. My heart clenched at the sight, and before I knew it, I was at her side shaking her gently and whispering for her to wake up.

She did, her eyes filled with fear and pain, shattering my heart to pieces.

"El. El it's okay. It's me Mike." I try to whisper soothingly.

Her eyes finally seem to focus on me and I see her smile just a bit before she breaks down crying. Without hesitation I pull her into a hug and let her sob into my shoulder. After a short time her breathing became normal and she pulled away to look at me.

"Thank you Mike." She said softly.

"Don't worry about it." I say quickly. "You're safe here. Mortifer and all of us are watching over you." This seems to make her smile.

"You too Mike?"

"Definitely." I state with determination. "And this time I will be strong enough to protect you. I promise."

Her brow furrowed with confusion. "You can get stronger?" She questioned. Then it occurred to me. El has only ever seen people and things as they are right at that moment. She's probably never been subject to seeing people change over time or, in this case, get stronger.

"Yes El." I murmur. "Mortifer is going to teach me how to be stronger. Then, I'll be able to help protect you. Not that you'll need much protecting, since you've got superpowers and all." I chuckle.

She smiles again but then suddenly frowns, her eyes taking on a distant look.

"El?"

"Yes Mike?"

"Do you want to talk about it? You're dream?" Her eyes widen with alarm. "You don't have to if you don't want to." I amend quickly. "But it can help."

After pondering it for a few moments she looks at me, her face touched with pain again. "Bad men. Took you all away. Couldn't stop them." Silent tears begin falling again, and just like that she's back in my arms and I'm reassuring her all over again.

"They're all gone El." My mind flickers to Mortifer telling me of their deaths. "They can't hurt you, or anyone anymore." I take a deep breath. "We're here for you. I'm here for you."

After she'd calmed down and started getting ready to sleep again, I got up to leave, but her hand reached up to grasp mine. I looked down at her, already knowing the question.

"I don't know El." I said reluctantly. "If my mom catches us..."

"Please?" She asked, her eyes pleading.

Well, I guess I'll just have to hope Nancy still has my back just in case.

"Okay."

I settle down next to her, practically a full foot from her and stare up at the ceiling. A couple seconds pass and I hear her shift closer to me until our shoulders are touching. I grasp her hand out of instinct that came from God knows where, and try to ignore the heat flooding to my cheeks and my racing heart.

I hear her let out a contented sigh and drift back into sleep.

Well, that was quick.

After a little while I feel my eyelids get heavy as well and the lure of sleep call out to me. After a bit of resisting I give in, knowing that for once, everything was okay.

9. Have You Faith In Me?

Eleven's P.O.V.

"You sure about this El?"

I nod seriously to my friend Will. This has to happen.

It has been almost a week since everything happened and I was no longer as tired from my time spent in the Upside-down. Since, learning of Will and what the boys call 'slugs', I resolved to help once I was in better shape.

So, here I am, with Lucas, Dustin, and Will. Mike is not here for some reason, but it's Will I'm more worried about. I will *not* allow my friend to suffer anymore.

"What are you gonna do?" Dustin asks.

I hold up my hand, fingers wide, and bring them into a fist. The boys seem to understand. Will actually seems a little afraid.

"I don't know El..." he stammers.

I try to give him a reassuring look.

"Trust me." I say quietly. He nods, obviously still nervous, and tries to force himself to relax. I close my eyes to focus and reach out with my mind, simultaneously reaching out with my hand, fingers outstretched again.

I can feel them around me. My friends. Dustin's concern for Will,

but sheer confidence in me. Lucas, oddly seems to harbor none of these doubts, trusting in me fully. And Will, despite having fear radiate off him in waves, seems more than ready to place his life into my hands.

I have to fight back the urge to cry. Again, not bad tears, but good. What have I done to deserve such wonderful friends that believe in me so much?

I delve in deeper into what I see as Will through my mind's eyes, searching, until I see them, and am honestly surprised I hadn't noticed them already.

The monsters, or slugs, as the boys call them, are so out of place it's just *wrong*. The Upside-down and the Rightside-up clearly never meaning to intertwine. I make sure to find every last one, or anything that so much as hinted at being associated with them, and begin to tighten my grip on their existence.

Of course, they start to squirm, to try and get away from the unseen force that was crushing them but to no avail. Even as Will starts to convulse and is caught by Dustin and Lucas, I fully clench my fist, practically liquifying the monsters that were once plaguing Will's body.

I finally open my eyes, wiping the blood from my nose on my sleeve to see Will throwing up the black goop that was once his tormentors on all fours. Lucas is patting his back reassuringly, while Dustin throws me a thumbs-up, another kind gesture my friends had filled me in on. I smile, even though I would rather Will didn't have to experience such discomfort.

"Will..?" I inquire once he's done puking.

He looks up at me, some black moisture still visible on his lips and teeth, looking terrible. My heart seems to clench a little at the sight, but then he smiles.

"It's okay El." He says, his smile growing as he stands up. "I could feel them inside me this whole time. Moving, crawling. But they're gone now. Thank you." He walks forward and pulls me into a hug, his gratitude practically shining off him. I feel light as air as the other boys join in on the hug.

My friends are finally okay.

Suddenly Will seemed to tense.

"Uh guys..." he pulled out of the hug and we all looked at him questioningly. "Give me a sec." He says quickly and darts out of the shed into his house.

We all exchange confused looks before shrugging and heading in to see what was up. We found him, or heard him is a better way of putting it, in the bathroom. Groaning a bit.

"You okay in there buddy?" Dustin asks knocking on the door.

"Yeah!" Will yells lightly back before following up with. "Just getting rid of the rest of those bastards."

"Hell yeah" Lucas cheers, though he appears to be vaguely uncomfortable with talking to Will through the door.

After a bit of more groaning Will speaks up again.

"Hey guys, how about after this we go find Mike and celebrate?"

"Sounds good." Lucas agrees.

"Amen." Dustin adds on.

"Dustin?" I whisper.

"Yeah El?"

"Where *is* Mike?"

He frowns.

"I thought you knew."

I shake my head, worry starting to etch in.

"I'm sure he just had to do chores or something. We'll head over to his place after this." He says with confidence that puts me more at ease.

"Good." I say back.

We all set our bikes in the front yard, before making our way to the door.

I had borrowed Mike's bike yesterday while he went with his mom to somewhere called 'the dentist's', having learned how to ride it, also from Mike, the day before.

Lucas knocks on the door, and we hear the shuffling of footsteps until the door opens to reveal Karen Wheeler.

"Hi Mrs. Wheeler!" Lucas and Dustin greet at the same time while Will and I just smile.

"Hi boys, and El, what can I do you for you guys?" She says, returning our smiles.

"Is Mike home?" I ask hopefully.

Her smile fades a bit, as if confused. "I thought he was with you guys?"

We all exchange looks, trying to piece it together, before we hear...

"Hey guys!"

We all turn around to see Mike walking, a bit stiffly, towards us. Karen returns back inside, figuring maybe we were just attempting a little joke, which are things I still don't quite understand.

"Mike!" Lucas exclaims.

"Where were you?" Dustin piles on.

Mike looks a little guarded for a moment before he provides an explanation.

"I was just training." He jogs in place to illustrate. "Training to be stronger."

Suddenly it clicks for me, Mike did tell me Morty would be training him. I just didn't expect him to look a little pained like he did right now.

The boys seemed to accept his explanation easily though. Will spoke up.

"Guess what?"

"What?" Mike asks.

"I'm cured." He says, smiling wide.

Realization dawns on Mike's face after a few seconds.

"H-how?!"

"El did it."

Mike grins and pulls his friend into a hug.

"That's awesome Will."

"I know."

He let's go of Will, and turns to me. Before I can say anything he has me engulfed in a hug of my own.

"You're amazing you know that?" He whispers to me, causing my

face and entire body to flush with warmth. I almost can't believe, for the hundredth time, that I am here, with my friends. That I even got to have friends. A family. Mike.

After he pulls away, he looks to the boys.

"So what are we doing now guys?"

Dustin grins. "We wanted to celebrate. You in?"

"Definitely." Mike grins back. "Arcade?"

"Sounds good." Will confirms.

"Let's go then." Lucas gestures to the bikes.

"Hey El." Mike prompts to get my attention.

"Yes?" I look at him expectantly.

"Since, we don't have a bike for you yet would you be okay sharing again?" He seems to turn a bit red, making me smile.

"Yes." I say happily, hardly needing to be convinced to be close to Mike Wheeler.

Denise's P.O.V.

Well, this was it.

I stared at the open rift in front of me going over what I had the

audacity to call a plan.

Seven had been recovered easily enough, so with that done it's now time for me to embark on task of far greater proportions.

Slaying the Angel.

I hear a familiar ringing in my ears.

GO FORTH MY CHAMPION AND DO NOT FAIL, LEST I BE FORCED TO RECONSIDER YOUR ROLE IN MY PLANS.

Nodding at the, not at all veiled, threat, I walk forward, back into the world I left behind.

Mortifer's P.O.V.

Observing the training of my two, to be, champions, I can't help but smile as I see them slowly grasp my lessons.

Nancy and Jonathan were progressing a bit faster than I expected, not that I was complaining in the slightest. Before long, I might be trusting them with important tasks of their own.

The adults had been doing okay too. Most of them. Ted was a little slow on the uptake, and Delilah Sinclair was constantly second guessing herself. But all in good time. They did only recently start training afterall.

And then we have Mike.

I had been training him in secret for now, and let's just say the kid seems to have little to no natural fighting instincts, but then again...

Neither did I once upon a time.

Yes, all in good time indeed.

"Cease." I command, and both teenagers freeze mid-stride.

"Well done today. Now do go and enjoy the rest of the it."

They both grin at each other and then up at me.

"Won't you come join us?" Jonathan offers causing me to smile and mask my surprise.
But I feel a portal making ready to open soon. Two, actually, but the other won't be for a few days.

"I'll have to catch you guys in the next one." I respond apologetically.

"No problem. Next time."

They both walk away, and I make all speed for the oncoming portal.

After a short time I am standing where the emergence is soon to take place, reaching out with my psychic senses to determine what is being sent my way.

A lone assailant, bearing the Old One's brand, and a dark, twisted weapon.

How about no?

Focusing, I reach out into the tear of reality and *push* the would be attacker way off course.

That should be enough to sufficiently deal with them. For now, at least.

"So, Kate. Do you like Dustin?" I ask casually.

The girl in question nods vigorously while smiling.

"Yes. He is good." She says simply. I can't help but smile.

"Well, I've been in touch with his family and as it happens they have an available spot open just for you."

She completely stops what she's doing.

"You mean, I could live with Dustin?" She asks quietly, excited.

"If you want."

Her smile grows wide and before you know it she's jumping up and down with excitement.

"That's mental!" She yells happily, using a word I know I've heard Dustin use more than once.

Observing her joy with a quiet smile I can't help been feel a slight downward tug on my heart.

She stops after a couple minutes and walks over to me, expression worried.

"Will I get to see you anymore?" She asks softly.

For a split second I want to ask her what she'd say if I told her no, but I shrug that off and smile widely, light filling me.

"Of course!" I exclaim warmly. "I will always be around." *Until I'm not.* Her smile returns.

"Then yes. I'd like to." She says beaming.

"It's settled then."

Months Pass

Nancy P.O.V.

I am so lucky I have Jonathan Byers in my life.

Me, just, and let's be honest, just a preppy girl who happened to get involved in things way beyond her.

Lying down, I look over at the the focus of my thoughts. He notices and looks over smiling at me contently, making my heart skip a beat.

"What are you thinking about?" He asks, and I feel my cheeks heat up.

"You." I answer shyly, causing him to grin and lean over to kiss me.

We just lay there for awhile in my bedroom, lightly listening to some music.

"Tough session huh?" He inquires.

I nod, knowing instantly what he's talking about. "But hey, we're improving. I think."

"We are." He confirms. "How's Eleven doing?"

"Pretty good." I say, really thinking about it. "Especially since she's always with my brother."

"Oh?" Jonathan smiles knowingly.

I nod before stating the obvious. "Yeah, she *adores* my brother, and the feeling is mutual. You should see the two together. It's quite a show to watch."

Jonathan chuckles at this.

"So, are they together, or soon to be?" He asks.

"Actually no." He lifts his eyebrows. "I know, but oddly enough I actually talked to Mike about it. Apparently, he wants to give El the chance to be free and experience life."

Jonathan whistles, clearly impressed. "That is very mature of him."

"I know right? Like, when did my little brother become all grown up? What's more, he said that he wouldn't *consider* being with her

until he was *certain* she knew that he was there for her no matter what."

"You know. I think I have a newfound respect for your little brother." He states.

"Me too." I admit little reluctantly. "He, thankfully, still got her stuff on Valentine's Day and all that though. You should have seen her glowing."

"I'll bet."

A short, but comfortable silence reigns before Jonathan speaks up again.

"What do you think of him?"

Again, he did not need to state who or what he was talking about.

"He seems...good? Right doing? What's the word?" I ask, stumped.

"Righteous?" Jonathan suggests, and I want to facepalm with how close I was.

"Yes righteous." I confirm. "That's a word you don't hear everyday."

"I know right?" Jonathan agrees. "I bet if we told him that too he would just pass it off as a joke and continue just being...him."

I nod, when another thought strikes me.

"You think he has family? Or a girlfriend for that matter?"

"That...is a very good question." Jonathan says. "We should ask him next time we see him."

"Yeah."

Eleven's P.O.V.

"El?"

"Yes Mike?" I look over at my favorite person in the world, which automatically brings a small smile to my face.

"Wanna play?" He asks warmly.

I look over at the boys setting up for truth or dare. Or, rather, the boys and Kate. My memory flickers for just a second to our meeting a few months ago.

"Hey guys." Dustin greets, seeming to be bursting with excitement. "Thanks for coming over."

It was only the third time I'd seen the inside of the Henderson household. I didn't like it as much as the Wheeler's, but it was still nice.

"No problem man." Mike says. "What's up?"

"Well, I have a new friend I wanted to introduce to you two and the guys but I thought it might be best to start slow." Dustin says weakly.

Mike seems a little perplexed at Dustin's evasiveness, but believes him to

have his reasons.

"So, can we meet them?" Mike asks.

Dustin looks vaguely panicked for a second before blurting out. "Yes, but first...El, you know how your number was eleven?" He asks me suddenly. I nod slowly, confused at his seemingly random question.

"Well, Mortifer found Eight awhile ago, and introduced us, and now her name is Kate."

Dustin continued to ramble. "She lives with us, and she's now ready to meet you guys, so..."

We both just stare at him in shock.

"Dust-" Mike starts.

"Please don't freak out." He stammers.

"But..."

"Please."

Mike just nods while I continue to stare.

"You can come down now!" Dustin yells up the stairs.

And down she came. As soon as she reached the bottom of the stairs I took two strides forward, placing myself in front of her.

She looks at me, seeming a little afraid, and slowly holds out her hand, palm up, revealing her number.

008.

I take a deep breath before showing my own 011. I see her eyes widen in surprise, and sadness, and happiness, and before she can say anything I pull her into a hug. She reciprocates after a few seconds and I can feel her start to shake with sobs.

"It's okay." I start, surprised again at the position I'm in as I feel my own tears start to come. "You're okay. The bad men can't hurt you anymore."

She nods into my shoulder.

"I-I know." She chokes out. "Morty told me. He saved me."

"Me too. He is good."

"Y-yeah."

"Yes." I tell Mike. If it has anything to do with him then I'm in.

"Great." He smiles wider, and I can't help but stare a little as he pulls me to the others. After we sit down Lucas speaks up.

"Alright, who's first?" He asks.

"Me." Will volunteers. "Kate and El don't know how to play so we might as well show them."

"Good idea." Lucas compliments. "So...truth or dare?"

Will seems to think for a moment before answering.

"Truth."

"Do you think El or Kate are attractive?" Lucas inquires grinning.

I can't help notice Mike and Dustin looking rather interested in his answer. Will, however, doesn't skip a beat.

"They both have characteristics that many males would find attractive, yes." He states nonchalantly. The boys either groan at his sly answer or whistle, seeming impressed.

"Now then," Will continues. "Dustin, truth or dare?"

"Dare." Dustin says excitedly, surprising Will, but before long he gets an idea.

"I'll go easy on you." He proclaims. "Do thirty push ups. Right now."

Dustins face drops.

"Th-thirty?"

"Thirty."

Dustin nods and gets down on his stomach. After a good deal of

effort, and encouragement on our part, he completes the dare. Out of breath, he breathes out. "Mike...truth...or dare?"

"Truth."

"Pansy."

"What?"

"Nothing."

He takes a moment to catch his breath before asking his question.

"Mike, what the hell do you do to work out?"

Mike looks thrown off.

"Huh?"

"Don't think we haven't noticed all the muscle you've been gaining man."

"Yeah!" Lucas chimes in.

"And I thought I was the only one who noticed." Will adds.

"You do look pretty good." Kate states casually, and I felt a flicker of jealousy shoot through me.

Mike, flustered by the sudden attention mutters something unintelligible.

"What?" Dustin presses.

"I've been training with Mortifer." He speaks up softly.

"Ohhh." They all said.

"Well, that explains how you were able to beat up Troy and his goon." Lucas reflects.

"Which was awesome by the way." Dustin adds.

"Can we join?" Will asks.

"You'd have to ask him." Mike answers, clearly looking uncomfortable. "Anyway, Kate truth or dare?"

Kate pauses. "Dare."

"Punch whoever you like most in this room."

Instantly Kate strikes Dustin in the shoulder.

"Ow!" Dustin complains, but you can see his smile. "What the hell Wheeler?"

Mike just shrugs.

"Well El." He looks at me. "Truth or dare?"

Wanting to be as brave as Kate I take a risk. "Dare."

"Same thing as Kate."

I punch Mike in the shoulder without hesitation and grin over at Kate.

Later that night we are all staring up at the ceiling.

"Hey guys?" Dustin speaks up.

"Yeah?" Mike and Will say.

"What do you think he's doing right now? Morty I mean."

"I don't know." Mike says.

"Good question." Lucas states.

I ponder this for a little bit before speaking up.

"We could see." I say slowly, and everyone's heads turn toward me. "Just a peek. Don't wanna spy." This is followed by some 'cools' or the equivalents.

I close my eyes and focus, telling everyone to hold unto me and close their eyes too.

Taking a moment to drag their minds in with me I start searching.

Before long though, I see him. It'd actually be pretty hard not to since his light and power all seemed to stretch across the void. I focus more, to get a clear perception of him and his surroundings.

What I see almost makes me completely withdraw in fear.

Morty, in his grey winged form, stood viciously repelling the nightmarish monsters of the Upside-down while they were trying to either get past him through the gateway or take him down all together.

I could feel everyone else's panic too as we all just watched in terror. The monsters never seemed to stop, spilling into the struggle in waves that appeared to be unending. We all despaired at what we figured to be an impossible situation.

We could all feel Mike's mind trying to get a message across, but apparently having difficulty doing so. I fed energy into him, feeling my nose start to bleed, but his voice came out clear.

Look at him.

Confused we all did as he said, and then we saw it.

Morty, our protector, didn't look daunted. He didn't even look doubtful as he severed and crushed or just downright annihilated monster after monster. His wings and limbs lashing out. Psychic bolts and waves pouring from him. His position unassailable. No, he looked sure. Sure of himself and that the hordes before him would fall before he did.

A memory suddenly flashed through my mind unbidden.

"Have you faith in your friends?"

"Faith?"

Suddenly, I felt Morty's mind's eye turn to me, as if he'd always known we were there.

Have you faith in me?

The words cut deep to my heart, but my answer didn't take more than a couple seconds.

Yes.

I could feel his smile.

Then return with the others and do not fear knowing I am watching over all you.

...okay.

I make my way back, pulling the others with me, until suddenly we're all opening our eyes and staring at each other in shock.

"You okay El?" Mike asks, reaching out to wipe away the blood coming from my nose, and I wonder, for the thousandth time, if I could possibly adore him more. I nod and lean into his shoulder.

"Sooo..." Dustin starts. "If it was anyone else I'd say we were screwed and should start heading for the hills, but..."

"It's him." Will finishes.

"Yeah."

A small silence takes place as we all try to absorb what we just witnessed.

"We should watch a movie." Kate suggests timidly, and we all stare at her incredulously. "To get our minds off it."

Slowly we all agree, needing a distraction.

"Mike?"

We are all about to sleep but there's a question I been wanting to ask Mike since halfway through the movie.

"Yeah El?" He turns those almost obsidian eyes toward me, his raven color hair swaying just a bit.

"Are you scared?"

He pauses, actually seeming to mull it over in his mind.

"No. Mortifer will protect us." He assures confidently.

"Morty." I correct. He chuckles.

"Yes, Morty." He agrees laying down on the sofa. "It's hard to put it into words, but I know he will keep us safe. At least tonight anyway."

"You...have faith in him." I state slowly, it coming out as a question.

He seems surprised at my choice of wording, but nods. "Yeah, I guess so."

"Me too." I whisper as I slide onto the couch with him, making him blush really red.

"Um...El. I'm not so sure that..." He stammers.

"Please?" I plead with him, knowing he won't turn me away.

He swallows and nods, slowly reaching his arm around to pull me closer. I press myself against him and rest my head on his chest, which is far more muscular than it once was.

"Hey, guys. We are still here. Don't do anything." Dustin teases. The rest of them are on the floor.

"Shut up Dustin." We both say at the same time, and turn to exchange adoring grins.

"Actually, that looks quite interesting." Kate speaks up. "I would very much like to try it."

"Not with Mike." I tell her a bit harshly snuggling up to him more. I feel him tense up, but know he's still smiling.

"Damn El, sure are staking your claim huh?" Lucas teases.

I look up at Mike, and he looks back, both of us seeming to get lost in the other's eyes, before whispering...

"Yes." And I lean up to kiss him, gently pressing my lips to his, savoring the feeling of being this close to him. After a few seconds it's over and I stare into Mike's now tomato red face, before setting my head back down on his chest.

That hadn't happened since that night in the cafeteria. This was nicer, less rushed.

Surprisingly, no ews are heard before Kate speaks up again, chuckling a bit.

"No, not Mike." She clears up. "I was thinking..." she pauses for effect. "Dustin."

The boys, along with Mike and I let out tiny ooos. Dustin looks like he's been shot with Lucas's slingshot, or, err, wrist rocket.

"What?" He gapes. "Are you crazy?"

Kate looks hurt. "If you don't want to..." She looks over at Will. "Will, you want to?"

Will trys to hide his conspiratorial smile while answering with a shrug. "Sure."

"Hell no!" Dustin all but yells, and we all shush him, not wanting to wake the rest of the Wheelers. "I mean..." He looks at us for any assistance, but we just smile back encouragingly. "Kate, you can...do that...with me."

Kate smiles, but hasn't had her fun yet. "But I thought you said you didn't want to."

Dustin looks on the verge of imploding in on himself. "I was just being stupid-

"Damn straight." Lucas interrupts.

"Shut up Lucas." Dustin shoots back, before turning back to Kate and continuing. "I was just being stupid, so if you still wanted..."

Kate stares at him blankly for a couple seconds, giving him just enough time panic, before grinning suddenly curling up to him.

"Good." She murmers, as she places her head on Dustin's chest. He looks like he's ready to bolt, but, at the same time, couldn't be happier.

After a few minutes pass Lucas speaks up again.

"Will? We really need to get girlfriends."

Will chuckles.

"Damn straight."

10. Searching Memories

Three Years Later

Eleven's P.O.V.

"Are you ready?" Morty asks.

I nod my head, a little nervous.

"What should I look for?"

He ponders for a few moments. "I honestly don't know. Anything will do. Just make sure to withdraw if it seems like too much, alright?"

I nod my head. It has been years since the sleepover where we'd witnessed Morty standing against our enemies from the Upside-down. Shorty after we'd approached him, practically begging him to teach us, to make us strong. It took a bit of explaining on our parts, and a bit of deliberation on his, but eventually he agreed.

I have since excelled far from my starting point before. Telekinesis is still my strong suit. Well, that along with finding people. But, lately he had me focusing on matters of the mind. He says that this will help me better understand people and therefore enable me to help them better.

That is what we are doing right now, but as I look into the eyes of my family's protector, I wonder just what I might see. He has always been cryptic about his past afterall. Whether it be about where he actually came from or if he actually has any other friends or family waiting for him elsewhere.

I take another breath and reach out to grip his extended hand, closing my eyes and focusing at the same time.

There is darkness, like the one I've walked before but with this strange fog encompassing everything farther than five feet from me. Before I could start to panic I could feel his mind pulling me in a specific direction, guiding me.

After a bit of walking, I come across Morty, who is now clad with robes of white, in a kneeling position. His eyes are shut and his aura is radiant.

I hesitantly move in front his kneeling form. He doesn't move, doesn't seem to notice my presence.

"M-morty?"

Still no response.

Hm...

Suddenly, one of my first memories with Morty strikes me, giving me an idea. I reach out and slowly place my hand on his head, feeling everything else fall away. I can feel his different memories coursing through him and I wonder at which one to select.

After a little while of searching I feel drawn to a memory that seems to have been of great significance to him in the past. I focus on it, bringing it to life.

Suddenly I'm seeing through his eyes as he falls to his hands and knees, confusion gripping him.

I look down at my hands, the ones now shrouded in this strange grey energy. Wait, grey energy? What, what had happened?

Looking around to get a bearing at my surroundings I become all too aware of the scene unfolding before me.

Great knightly armored warriors of light, clashing with a variety of monsters and darkly clad assailants.

I caught sight of the knights' leader, and memories stared flowing back to me.

Valerie Zadamei, Oracle and leader of the Guardians chosen by the Father. She was was quicker, and far more powerful than the rest of them, which is saying something since each and every one of them was a legendary champion in their own right.

There were other warriors in the midst of everything, that neither side were touching for some reason.

Wait. Those were the Belators. *My* Belators. We had come here to stop an ancient and supposedly unkillable evil. I had led them here, alongside the Guardians, with my second in command at my side.

My second in command. My best friend. Where is he?

I look behind me to see the Gateway that we had come to destroy in all its entirety. I shiver, remembering I had just been in it...with Arodedus, and that...*thing*. Then, as if on cue, my best friend Arodedus walked out, and my heart soared.

That was until I saw his eyes. Nevermind the new, terrible black armor he now wore that seemed to emanate malice. Nevermind the great mace he now held that practically bled wrongness.

His eyes were no longer his. No, I had seen these eyes before when facing that *thing*. These eyes were the embodiment of evil. Not some made up melodramatic evil that humans so often scoffed at

nowadays, but the actual, real thing.

Just like that I knew I wasn't looking at my best friend anymore.

"Arodedus..." I breathe. Unable to help myself.

His face contorts into a dark grin.

"Master."

Even his voice was no longer recognizable.

"You're not looking so good Master." He sneers. "One might say you're looking rather grey." He chuckles before turning to the battlefield and raising his voice to a great roar.

"Destroy the servants of the Most High brothers and sisters! Our old master is lost, and now I shall lead us down a new path!"

To my complete horror nearly every one of them obeyed, and took up arms against the now horrifically outnumbered Guardians.

How could I not have seen this in them?

No, I knew they were capable of this but ignored it. How could I have been so foolish?

I turn back to Arodedus seeing him heft his great mace high, aiming at the Oracle who, for the first time since I've met her, seemed to not know the blow was coming.

I am there in an instant, faster than I can think, blocking his blow with one of my great wings. Wings that I, up to this point, had no idea I possessed.

His eyes widen in surprise.

"Not like this Aro." I say through clenched teeth.

"Step aside *Hill*." He snarls. The Oracle makes ready to fight him but I shake my head at her, at which she reluctantly nods and leaps back into the fray.

"No. Just stop Aro. We can get you help. We can get *it* out of you."

For a brief second I can swear I see his eyes shift, back to something resembling my old Aro. The one whom I'd taught and trusted so much to. But once the second passes those dark eyes are back.

"Prepare to meet your end Master." He resolutely declares and I feel my heart ripping apart.

"Aro, please don't do this..." I beg as he raises his mace yet again. It comes down for blood but I weave around with my new impossible speed. I realize that he has left himself open but I can't bring myself to strike him down. In the background of all this I can feel something like our wills clashing in the air around us.

As if realizing that I will not seriously raise my hand against him,

he launches into a fury of attacks, both with his mace and fist that was now shrouded in dark energy. I dodge and block with my wings but as the rain of blows keep falling upon me I slowing begin to accumulate wounds.

Part of me is screaming to strike back. To crush him, but I can't.

Finally, after what seems like an excruciatingly long time I collapse to my knees in pain and fatigue.

He stands victoriously in front of me. "I expected more Master." He mocks, hefting his mace for the killing blow.

I close my eyes waiting for the mace to fall.

It never did.

"...Hill?" It's Aro's voice. Pained and struggling.

I open my eyes.

The cruel blackness is gone from his eyes. For the moment.

"...Aro?" I manage to get out.

"Hill, it's okay. I'm holding it back for the moment. But if you don't destroy me...us right now, it will be free to do whatever it wants with me. We won't get another chance."

"Aro, I can't."

"Yes you can. Don't worry, I'll be *safe* after. Forever. Just please, don't let it use me."

Tears were now pouring down my face in an endless stream.

"You're sure?" I utter. "You're sure you'll be safe, and that there is no other way?"

"Yes." There is no hesitation. No doubt. My heart, whatever is left of it, is shattering. Still I stand up and gather all of what I now see to be my psychic might.

"Thank you." He says. "For saving me all that time ago. For making me into a real person."

I shake my head slowly, a small smile working its way onto my face despite everything.

"It wasn't just me. It was *you* Aro. It was who you were. Who you are, in here." I gesture to his chest, and he smiles.

"I'm ready Hill." He says shaking from the effort he must have been exerting all this time.

I nod, smiling, tears still running down my cheeks, as I bring my full strength into a massive psychic bolt.

"Goodbye Hill. My old friend."

"Goodbye Aro. Until we meet again." My voice cracks, and I release my massive psychic bolt and blast my best friend from existence.

I open my eyes, tears falling from them, completely astonished by what I'd witnessed. I see Morty with his eyes still closed, silent tears making their way down his face as well.

I pull my dear friend into a hug, hearing him start to sob. It's the first time I've ever seen or heard him cry. I actually want to cry too, for the pain Morty had to endure, and the passing of his friend that he wrought with his own hands.

But I don't. This is one of the few times he needs me to be strong for him, not the other way around. It is an honor I do not require even the slightest convincing to undertake.

After tears stop falling and his breathing becomes normal he pulls away.

"Sorry El." He mutters.

"Why?" I ask not understanding.

"For...you know. Breaking down a little."

I shake my head. "No. Don't be sorry. It's okay." Desperately wanting him to understand. "We're all here for you Morty. I'm here for you. Like you were there for me."

He finally smiles, putting me at ease, and stands up.

"Thank you El." He says gratefully. "I'm gonna take a bit of a walk, okay?"

I nod. But as he starts walking away I can't help but ask a question.

"Was that your name before? Hill?"

He stops, not turning around, before speaking up.

"It was once."

11. The Deal

1986

Lucas's P.O.V.

"Hey Will?"

"Yeah?"

"How come *we* don't have girlfriends yet?"

"Girlfriends?" Will snickers.

"Yeah girlfriends." I pout somewhat seriously, which he picks up on and chooses to adopt a more focused demeanor.

"Does it bother you often?" He presses. "To not have a girlfriend I mean."

I shrug. "Not usually. It's just that sometimes when I see Mike and Eleven, or Dustin and Kate...I can't help but wonder...why not us?"

Will hums at this.

"I mean, we're not that bad are we? We're okay people, right?"

"...I suppose." Will ponders for a second. "You know what I think you should do Lucas?"

"What?" I ask, grateful to finally have some input.

"You should find something you care about more."

"Huh?"

"Find something you care about more." He repeats simply, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. "As for our group's couples, just try to be genuinely happy for them."

"Are you genuinely happy for them?" I challenge.

He turns to face me and smiles.

"Yes."

And I believed him, there was only honesty in his eyes. It's not like I wasn't happy for them too. It's just that sometimes those longing or insecure thoughts could creep in. Stupid feelings.

But I knew my friend was right. He was the wisest of us four. Hence his character, Will the Wise.

"Alright then, I guess I'll just have to find this something." I declare, rising up from the grass.

"Cool, you'll..." Will starts but stops when we both hear very lightly placed footsteps.

There was a time when such a sound would have gone unnoticed by us, but Mortifer had been training us for years now, honing our skills and instincts. We remain casual all the while being ready to leap into action.

A figure emerges from the treeline, distinctly making a beeline for us. My body starts tensing, getting ready, before Will places a hand on my shoulder, shaking his head while wearing a knowing smile. I keep watching the approaching figure until...oh.

"Mortifer." I greet warmly, smile already forming. "It is good to see you, but why are *you* out here so late?"

That oh so familiar smile of his emerges as he closes the remaining short distance. "For a very good reason, of course, Lucas." His smile grows. "Hello there Will."

Will nods in acknowledgement.

"So you gonna tell us, or keep us in suspense?" I poke a little fun at which he seems to chuckle.

"I am here to give you your weapons." He states simply.

I pause, a little befuddled.

"Mortifer, what do you mean? We already have weapons."

His expression becomes more serious. "You misunderstand. I am here to give you *your weapons*."

...

It, unfortunately, takes me a few more seconds, and turning around to see Will's raised eyebrows expression, to grasp the actual meaning behind his words.

Nancy and Jonathan were the most recent ones to receive their *weapons*. This would be a major game changer. This was like getting close to some sort of graduation.

Taking a moment to swallow, I speak up. "Thank you, Mortifer."

"We are honored, Mortifer." Will chimes in.

Mortifer, in response, holds out his two hands. The air around them starts to distort and blur, until two primal weapons appear in them. A shield and a sword.

"Lucas, these are your's."

Taking a moment to appreciate their appearance I reach out to inspect them more fully.

Wait.

These hardly weigh anything.

And they're grey. Like him when he goes full on Grey Angel.

I really feel like I shouldn't be surprised. Nancy and Jonathan had been pretty vague in describing their own weapons though, so what was I supposed to expect?

He holds out his hands again, and before you know it two twin Chinese looking swords are there waiting to be taken up.

"Will, these will suit you."

Will nods and grasps each handle firmly, shortly after taking a few practice swings and looking up at Mortifer in appreciation. Mortifer simply nods to the both of us

"Now that you have your weapons, expect to be training with them from now on." Oh this is gonna be good. "Like right now, there are some properties of the weapons you need to be shown before you proceed further."

Will and I exchange glances before following our teacher whom had already begun walking back towards the woods.

Not the night I was expecting, but I'm more than alright with that.

1987

Mortifer's P.O.V.

They have learned well, and will only improve with time.

Mike, the greatest of them in terms of combat prowess, would be able to crush most in a straight up fight, and just downright mow down anything lesser the most skilled.

Will was the stealthier one. The duel wielding assassin champion. It almost seems as though his time in the Upside-down has taught him how to be one with the dark.

Lucas, while being a highly formidable warrior, found his best match in tactics and battle planning. This will no doubt come in handily in the great battle ahead.

Dustin, on the other hand, was somewhat of a berserker when it came to the heat of battle, his savage battle axe cleaving apart any foe that dared to stand before him.

And don't even get me started on the girls...

Kate had proved to be a proficient spear fighter, but, of course, her true power lies in her gifts. Her psychic waves and bolts are similar to that of my own, though she has recently begun to grasp how to shield herself as well. Again, similar to myself. With the correct

approach and application of power I could see her hold a gate, just herself, for days against great numbers.

And then we have El.

I suspect she is the strongest of them, at least in a way. While learning the way of the sword as well, her abilities skyrocket her to a whole new level.

Her telekinesis is now far more powerful and capable of encompassing many things at once. She can hear thoughts now, if she focuses, which she often doesn't, having a keen sense of the term privacy. She can still find people, naturally. But, most importantly, I have taught her how to open portals to and from the Upside-down. Why? Two capable people are better than one.

The rest had done their job of repelling the minor, though they would not think minor, incursions from the enemy. But, I could feel their forces shifting on the other side of the veil. They are gathering. Preparing.

Soon the Old One would make its play.

But, I needed more time.

For what I don't know, but there it was.

So it is I decided to extend the hand of negotiation to the dark overlord, and that is why the boys and two girls were armed up and ready to head through the portal with me. The boys, with their firearms and true weapons, the girls with the same in addition to the bracelets I had gifted them with.

The bracelets were constructs I had created once El had begun to fear of unintentionally hurting those she cared about during one of her episodes. Especially Mike. The bracelet holds back their power once it senses they are no longer in control. Acceptances may apply. Kate had also accepted the failsafe with gratitude, and quickly discovered that the device could also be used to channel her own abilities.

All that. It seems like it happened just yesterday. Funny how time

flies by.

I look at them, proud of the progress they've made and the people they've become.

"Ready?" I check.

They all give their confirmations.

"Then let's go." I say, while turning around. I stare at the portal a moment, wondering if I'm making a mistake, before casually walking through.

I emerge in the twisted reality that is the Upside-down and instantly notice some disturbing facts.

One, there are many structures here now that do not exist in the Rightside-up. To put one more on edge there appears to be something almost *sentient* about them.

Two, and this I already knew, none the the creatures arrayed around us were fighting each other. They simply waited.

Three, the oppressive atmosphere of this foul place had only increased. No doubt this was due to the Old One and the peculiar structures it had raised.

The Old One that was now descending from above all this to speak with me. It didn't have to, but it seems even being what it is, it still recognizes customs and values such as honor.

YOU ARE HERE ANGEL. NOW SPEAK.

I took a deep breath, noting the positions my friends had taken around me. Hm...friends. I hadn't yet thought of them as much, despite all the time we'd all spent together. I always saw myself as their protector, their guardian, but never their friend. "Old One, I am here to propose we wait three more years before we finally end this stalemate."

There is a long silence.

EXPLAIN.

"Because it is not time yet." I try to say convincingly. "And I'm sure you know that. In three years we will settle our conflict, or perhaps you would have found a way to neutralize me by then, rendering your victory assured."

I could feel the questioning minds of my champions raised around me, El's in particular.

I will not let it harm you.

I only smiled back through my mind's gaze waiting for my foe's response.

IT WILL BE SO...IF YOU FACE TWENTY OF MY MINIONS...

Well that should be easy...

WITHOUT THE USE OF THE ETHER.

Maybe not that easy. By 'ether' the thing meant my psychic power. While I could still fight at superhuman levels, I am not sure if I could penetrate all these creatures' armor without that particular weapon at my disposal.

But what choice did I have?

"I accept your bargain, Old One." I concede with a bow. "I am ready to begin on the premise that you give your word that you will not raise a hand, nor compell another's hand to be raised, against my champions."

THE WORD IS GIVEN. NOW STORE YOUR POWER ELSEWHERE. I WILL NOT HAVE YOU BRINGING IT ABOUT AS A LAST RESORT.

"Is my word not enough?"

NO WORD IS TRUSTWORTHY IN THE FACE OF DEATH.

While I disagreed wholeheartedly with that statement, I still had to figure this out...

Oh! That could work.

Eleven's P.O.V.

Morty suddenly spun around and walked over to me. I stared at him eyebrow raised in question.

"El." He starts, holding up a bracelet. This one looked far more integrate than mine. More powerful. "Can you please hold my psychic might for me?"

My mouth fell open. What? He *needed* that, right? How would he fight without it? I started to shake my head.

"El." He said again, voice soft, but pleading. "I know what I'm asking is a lot, and doesn't really make sense, but I need you to trust me on this one. Please."

It's like my insides were warring against each other. Logic and trust pinned against one another.

"Okay." I breathe out.

Mike turns around slightly from his position to look at me.

"El, are you sure?" His voice is full of concern, making me love him all the more.

"Yes." I respond, not taking my eyes off Morty. "I have faith in him."

Morty smiles, looking a bit surprised. Does he ever expect anyone to love or trust him?

"Then put this on." He prompts. I take the bracelet and put it on, feeling the complex mechanisms within that were magnificently designed to channel and control that which I am about to receive. I nod to Morty, letting him know I'm ready. He hesitates.

"Whatever happens, do not interfere, nor let any of the others

interfere, alright?"

I wanted to say no, but instead nodded. He takes my hand.

"Brace yourself." He warns.

I do. Bringing about my greatest fortitude and discipline.

Then I felt it. The transfer of his power.

It was...

CRUSHING.

I quickly sat down knowing I would fall soon if I kept standing.

This was insanity. No, it was stupid. It was like trying to hold the sun in the palm of your hand.

I couldn't do this.

Mike's P.O.V.

"Protect her." Morty commanded. "I must go face this trial."

We all formed a ring around her as Morty began his challenge of combat. His eyes already glowed and his form blurred with speed as he weaved between the monsters. I saw some the nightmares get sent flying back, but before I could internally rejoice, they would get back up and charge back into the fray, practically unharmed.

I turned to look at El. She had her eyes closed, her body was shaking, tears running down her face, and her expression was that of the look I recognized as 'I-know-I-will-fail'. I instantly sit down in front of her, the others adjusted effortlessly to complete the protective circle.

"El." I say gently. "El, it's me. I'm here."

"M-mike?" Her voice came out broken, and the ache in my chest intensified.

"Yeah it's me, Mike." I say sootheningly. "Listen to me El. You can

do this."

More tears run down her face.

"I-I can't." She manages through her apparent pain.

"Yes you can El." I encourage taking her hand, the one with the new bracelet. It already feels warm. "I'm right here beside you."

I see one of the corners of her lips curl upward for a moment.

"Promise?" She breathes.

"Promise."

Will's P.O.V.

He was going to lose.

At least all analysis would point to that.

He was dodging and weaving sure, but occasionally a strike hit its mark. You wouldn't notice unless you knew what you were looking for. For example, as I watch a claw rip through his shoulder hyper quick, I see white fire flood the wound, instantly, or close to instantly, healing the damage dealt. After innumerable strikes like this he was beginning to slow. His normal weapons lay spent at on the ground. Pistol empty, sword broken. Now, he only lashed out with his limbs, which were incapable of doing any permanent harm. So, eventually, at this rate, he would lose, and he seemed to know it.

I look back at Mike and El. Mike doing his comforting thing that always seems to be exactly what El needs. El is looking strained to the point of breaking, a rare, ripple of psychic lightning firing from her every so often in a backwards direction. Which is good I suppose, since if a single one of those hit one of the demons Mortifer was fighting, I'm sure the Old One would call the whole deal off.

I look back at my teacher, my friend, and see him kneeing just a bit before the wall of enemies charging at him. I feel my heart sink.

No.

He will win.

He. Will. Win.

Just as the largest and foremost of the creatures is about to land a blow on him, I hear him say something in a level voice. I almost can't make it out, but I do.

"Calibir." He voices, then moves so fast I almost lose him.

Given everything that I'd witnessed so far, you can imagine my shock when I see him cleave apart the beast in front of him with a, honest to God, sword of brilliant white fire.

"What the-" Lucas fumbles out.

"I know." I interrupt.

"That's amazing!" Dustin proclaims.

"Amen." Kate agrees, as we watch him carve apart every last one of those monsters. He stops and looks up at the Old One that seems taken aback but not surprised. It nods, acknowledging him fulfilling his end of the bargain. After returning the nod, he walks back over to us.

"Get El, and let's get out of here." We all just stare a moment before complying. Mike hefts up El and we all make our way back through the gateway, Mortifer being the last one through.

...

We emerge back into our reality.

"Morty, take it back." Mike demands raising his voice in concern.

El looks terrible. Besides the blood coming from her eyes and ears, which hadn't happened in years now, her skin was charred at her wrist, where the bracelet was still searing her flesh.

Mortifer walked over shakily, took her hand in his, and did just as Mike requested.

The change was instant. For El, anyway. She relaxed looking as though the weight of the world had been lifted from her shoulders, and peacefully slipped into unconsciousness. Mike still looked concerned, but allowed himself to relax a little.

"She'll be fine." Mortifer assures with a tired smile, looking no better than he had a moment ago.

"Morty, are *you* alright?" Kate asks as he starts to walk in the direction of the lodge. He doesn't answer right away, but stops, swaying a bit.

"I..." He starts but never finishes.

Because the next moment he is impacting the ground, just as unconscious as El.

Kate's P.O.V.

It's as if my heart stopped beating at the sight.

Morty, my savior, friend, and mentor had been invincible all these years. He never tired, was never vulnerable.

This simply couldn't be so.

Move!

My inner voice sprung me into action. I quickly went to check his breathing...good. He didn't seem seriously hurt. Just hollow, drained of whatever radiant light that had previously filled him. I look at the others who are standing in a state of disbelief that mirrored what mine was beforehand.

"Dustin. Help me carry him." I command. "Will, make sure ahead is safe. Mike, you've got El. Lucas, keep an eye out in case that *thing* goes back on its word."

I finish relaying the plan to them, but they all still stand paralyzed, as if in a trance.

"Move!" I yell at them, snapping them out of it. Dustin, helps me lift

Morty. Mike gingerly picks up El. Lucas nods to Will who returns the gesture and takes off, quickly disappearing into the trees. I look back at the still open portal.

I wasn't about to just trust that that *thing's* word. I couldn't open gates, but I sure could destroy them. Using sheer psychic force I collapse the portal, and start the small trek with Dustin back to the lodge.

"You're incredible, you know that?" He blurts out.

I smile.

"I know." I reply, causing us both to snigger.

"He'll be alright." He comforts, catching me looking at my guardian in worry.

"I know."

Denise's P.O.V.

What...where am I?

I take in my surroundings slowly. Trees, lots of trees, and it's night. Of course it's night. How did I get here? Wherever here is.

I stand up, legs feeling way too wobbly, and try to take a step anyway.

It is with a total lack of surprise as I fall back to the ground, that I discover this was a mistake. Fine, until my legs wanna cooperate, I'll just crawl.

After a couple minutes the questions return.

Why am I here?

Who even am I?

Having no answers I just keep crawling, hoping enlightenment will come later.

Why am I not scared?

I mean, I have no idea who I am, or where I am. The only thing I know is that my legs feel like mush, and I'm in some woods in the dead of night. But...the dark, the shadows, look friendly, like they'll shield me.

Maybe I'm just badass.

Or insane.

Either one.

But three questions that would not stop nagging me consumed a significant portion of my thoughts.

Am I alone? Is there anyone else?

Is anyone even looking for me?

Hopper's P.O.V.

Still not awake. It's been two days, and still nothing. At least El woke up yesterday. Tough kid. That scorch mark on her wrist probably wouldn't be healing anytime soon though, if at all.

The kids, or err, I guess the teens had filled me in on the details upon arrival. The other adults, to include Jonathan and the Wheeler girl, had arrived soon after me. Since then we all had taken turns with the watches. The one over Mortifer, and the one over the lodge itself. The latter probably wasn't needed since the teens absolutely refused to leave until he had regained consciousness, but better safe than sorry.

I look out at the setting sun, admiring its colors while wondering idle thoughts.

Why does this man undergo such pain and suffering for us? Clearly he could have left a long time ago, he has the power, but he hasn't. Instead he has stayed, protected us, and made us capable of protecting ourselves.

I've talked about this with Joyce already, to which she just looks at me with an odd expression and says simply, as though she were reciting it from somewhere, "Mortifer."

I mean, I get it. I just have a hard time believing it sometimes.

On a more pressing note...why the hell hasn't he aged a goddamn day?!

It has been around SIX YEARS, and he still looks exactly like how he was back during those first crazy, confusing days. It just doesn't make sense, even on a basic level!

No, I'm not even a little jealous.

I let out a sigh, temporarily expelling my wayward thoughts, and look back down at Mortifer's unconscious form. If I didn't know better, I'd say he was sleeping.

"Why are you still here?" I whisper. "You don't have to be. You could have ditched awhile ago, but instead you stay here for all this. Why?"

I turn back to the view, the sun practically gone now, wishing I had a cigarette even though I had quit three years ago.

"Because I love you." A sure, strong voice spoke.

My eyes dart back down to see Mortifer finally awake. My mouth drops open, and he smiles, that smiling bastard.

"Because I love all of you. You are all so very precious to me. Even you Jim." With that he sits up and makes ready to rise. I reach out a hand to steady him.

"Hey, you sure you're up for standing right now?" I caution. "You've been out of it for just over two days."

That damn smile returns twofold. "Just over two days huh? Well, anyway, yes. There are things I must tend to."

Okay, if he were a normal person I would have told him to sit the

hell down and take it easy. Unfortunately, it was him, but even he has limits, the past few days were evidence of that.

"Are you sure?" I press.

He looks me in the eyes.

"Yes." He rises up and heads to the door, me trailing behind.

"Thank you." He says suddenly, casually.

"For what?" I inquire.

"For caring about me." He clarifies as though it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Why wouldn't I...

"Morty!" Kate squeals as soon as she sees him round the corner and runs to her guardian. Morty's smile grows warmly at the sight, and before you know it she's jumped up and clinging to him like she's afraid he'll disappear any moment now. He laughs heartedly.

"I was so worried." She whispers, tears starting to form. "You weren't waking up, and we couldn't do anything, and..."

"Shh" He gently hushes her. "I'm okay now. Just had to recover a bit." She nods, but tightens her grip causing an audible crack to emanate from his back. "Now, now my beloved child. I still need to breathe, and we wouldn't want to make Dustin jealous now, would we?"

She lets out a giggle. "He'll understand."

As if on cue, the rest of the teens come up the stairs, having likely heard the girl's previous squeal. Dustin, true to the girl's word, doesn't even have even a flicker of jealousy course through him, instead he breaks out into his full smile and rushes over to join in the hug, with the others right behind him.

Mortifer welcomes all of them, and I just watch as he comforts, and jokes with the younger ones. It's not the first time I've seen that look

on their faces while they're gazing at him. He is their role model, their hero, their guardian.

After awhile he pulls apart from them and focuses on Eleven. "You did so well El. You have done me proud." She practically glows as she beams up at him. The Wheeler boy seems happy to see her recognized as well. "Can I see your hand?" Mortifer asks, concern lacing his features. She slowly raises the hand with the charred wrist, and placed it into his.

She lets out a gasp as the charred flesh falls off and regenerates from seemingly nothing. She gawks at her wrist, which is good as new after but a few moments, and crushes Mortifer with another hug.

After they are done he speaks up again. "I need to take a walk alone now everyone, so please do head back to your homes so we can talk tomorrow."

Huh?

"But..." Lucas starts but is cut off.

"I know it is weird, and sudden but trust me. I must tend to some affairs."

"Affairs?" El asks, a familiar confused expression on her face.

"He means work or personal matters." Mike supplies, to which El nods gratefully.

Mortifer makes to walk downstairs, but looks back at me. "I trust you can take it from here?"

"Yep."

"Good. Speak with you soon then." He calls out, walking down the stairs.

There is a brief silence.

"Well, you heard the man." I say. "Pack up and let's head back."

Mortifer's P.O.V.

I open the front door and see a surprised Karen Wheeler.

She was keeping watch outside. Not a bad idea. A bit paranoid, but all the better. She quickly makes her way to me and pulls me into a hug, which was really becoming a thing for me today.

"I'm glad you're alright." She says, as she pulls away from me to give me a genuine smile. It had taken a little over two years to get rid of the formal fake smiles in favor of the real ones but it was worth it everytime it worked its way onto her face.

"Thank you Karen." I smile back. "Would you mind helping Jim with the youngins? I've gotta take a walk."

She looks at me inquisitively before finally nodding and heading in, trusting me to handle whatever it is I was setting out to do.

Now then.

After a good deal of walking I was finally close.

I silently made my way through the trees, towards the noise I could now hear, until I was finally behind it. Or a better pronoun might be her.

It was the very same pale brunette that I'd faced and tried to help all those years ago. She looked ragged, thin, and injured. Something was certainly off with her legs in particular.

So...I should help her right?

Right?

Or...a different thought crept through me. Or...you could end her right here, protect your friends from her in the future.

Hm...

...

No. That is not who I am, nor who I will be.

Denise's P.O.V.

The sound of someone clearing their throat made me jump, or at least jump as much as one might expect from a crawling position.

I turn around ready to fight, only to see a young man raising his hands to show him meaning no harm.

"Sorry." He spoke apologetically. He had a nice voice. "Didn't mean to surprise you like that. How are you sister?"

Sister? Judging by the complexion of our skin alone there's no way we could be related, let alone siblings. Unless, he didn't mean sister in the traditional way, but rather as a term of endearment.

"I've been better." I admit, having to trust someone, and lowing my guard. "I just woke up somewhere around here awhile ago, and I have no idea where here is, or why I'm even here." I see his face shift between several expressions I don't understand so I just continue. "I know you don't even know me but...can you help me out? I'm kind of in over my head here."

He seems to see I'm being honest with him, and gives a small, warm smile. "Of course, sister. Would you mind if I picked you up?"

It would take awhile to get anywhere otherwise so...

"Please." I grant. He carefully scoops me up, and starts walking in some seemingly random direction.

"What's your name?" I ask after a couple moments.

"Mortifer." He answers.

"Mortifer." I say slowly. "That's quite the name. Who gave it to you?"

"I did." He replies, seeming far away. "A long time ago."

A long time ago huh?

"And your's?" He asks.

It just occurs to me that I hadn't even remembered my name up to this point. Fortunately, it comes to me in an instant, becoming the only thing I actually know. Strange that it would come to me now.

"Denise. My name is Denise." I answer with confidence.

"Denise..." He voices. "That is a lovely name."

"Thank you." I say accepting the compliment.

"Well here we are." He announces and I look to see what looks like a decent size house practically appear before my eyes.

"Woah." I murmer.

He chuckles a bit. "Now then, let's see if we can get you on better footing."

First author's note: I am rushing a bit now because I know the main story I want to write, but not all the inbetween. So, I will continue doing this until the story reaches it's end, and then probably go back and add some more fluffy bonding times. I also feel like I have to do this or I'll never finish it, and I *have* to finish it. Thank you for reading. Any input you have is welcome.

12. A Helping Hand

Denise's P.O.V.

"There you go." Mortifer said as he set me down on the bed, and I almost moaned at how good it felt. Crawling through a forest for hours...this was a much welcome, and needed change.

"Thank you. Really."

"Not a problem." He replied, an easy looking smile coming to him. "What would you like to eat?" My normal course of action would be to decline such an offer, but the all too evident fatigue and aching stomach convinced me otherwise.

"Something breakfast related, if that's alright." I hesitantly ask, not wanting to seem demanding of the one whom had taken me in. Plus, I still really didn't know a lot about this young man. There was something familiar about him though.

He chuckled, probably since I'd asked for breakfast in the dead of night. "You got it." He chirped, and left the room. A few seconds pass and I hear the stove click on, followed shortly by the breaking of eggs, and then laughter at what I can only guess is a mishap. This, despite everything, makes me smile.

But now that I'm alone...

I quickly, but quietly shuffle around the room, searching through drawers and the like for some sort of weapon. It's not that he'd given me cause for such precautions but better safe than sorry.

Finally I found a knife, or a more appropriate term would be dagger. I then made my way back to the bed, sliding it under my pillow, and proceeded to wait for my apparent host. It wasn't much longer until he strode back into the room, tray in one hand, pitcher of water in the other. He set them down on the bedside nightstand with a simple, "Here you go!"

I took one look at the tray and felt my world get brighter.

Now this man could cook!

"You mind if I just...?" I trail off gesturing towards the tray.

He seems to get it. "Oh! Of course, I will be around so if you need me just call out for me, alright?" I nod and he leaves the room. There is a short pause before my endeavor of destroying all of the tray's contents. Let's just say, that food didn't stand a chance.

After about five minutes afterwards I feel the rush of enhanced drowsiness come over me. That, on top of my already nigh incapacitating fatigue, had my eyes begging me to shut them. I briefly debated sneaking out but thought better of it.

No, this could work for now.

With that thought I finally gave in to the beckoning blackness.

I awoke to the sound of birds singing and sunlight filtering through the windows.

Gotta admit, I have no idea if I'm still dreaming right now.

Taking in my surroundings a second time I notice the refilled water pitcher and the missing tray. Hm...I reach under the pillow, finding the dagger is, surprisingly, still there.

I try to get up, somehow having forgotten that I have very limited use of my legs, and consequently collapse onto the ground, making a bit of commotion.

"Damnit." I mutter.

Swift footsteps make through way to my room's door, revealing Mortifer, still getting used to that name, who immediately made to help me up, but I halted him with a raised hand. He stopped, a confused demeanor quickly spreading across his features.

"I want to do it myself." I clarify for him, while raising myself to a sitting position on the edge of the bed. Once I was comfortable, I took

in my gracious host again, noting his features were rather...ahem, desirable. Don't even get me started on the hair. It just didn't make sense. I mean, typically gravity is supposed to pull down people's hair. That being said, it seems to have made an exception with him.

"Sorry about that." I apologized.

"Don't be." He quickly dismissed. "Actually, I wanted to talk to you about that. Your legs that is."

There's a joke in there somewhere but I ignore it.

"What about them?"

"I would like to discover what has gone awry in them." He said, then after a beat. "With your permission of course."

After a couple seconds I give him a nod. "Sure, please. If you think you can help then please do." At this he quickly kneels in front of me, and, oh so gently, takes one of my legs into his hands, one hand on my calf, the other on my knee. After a few seconds he shifts to examine the other one. His hands feel strong, but kind on my skin, and that seems like an odd combination for some reason. A few more seconds pass until he nods in confirmation, and looks up at me.

"I can fix this easily if you'd like." He states with determination.

"Wait, what?!" I blurt out, taken aback by the sudden declaration. "How would you...what's even wrong with them?"

He smiles a bit cryptically. "You would not believe me if I told you, you just have to see it."

What? "Why can't you just explain and I can judge from there?"

He just shrugs with a half smile, and gets up as if to leave. "What would you like for breakf-"

"Do it."

"Hm?"

"Do whatever it is you were going to do." I ask. "Please."

He nods and kneels back down, placing one hand on each leg, his expression focused. I waited to see if anything special was supposed to happen until I saw it.

His eyes...around his pupils were two fiery white halos.

I gasped when I felt a strange kind of warmth pour from his hands into my legs, and then into the rest of my body. I felt the bad wiped away, and the super accerated healing taking place within my lower extremities until suddenly that all stopped, and the warmth receded.

He slowly removed his hands, the fire in his eyes fading away, and again made to leave the room.

"So breakfast?" He inquired again.

"What the hell was that?!" I ask raising my voice.

He proceeds to walk out of the room, no doubt heading to the kitchen.

"Hey?!" I yell after him. "Answer me!"

I hear a snigger.

"Why don't you come over here and ask me again?" He practically dares. But there it is. I look down at my legs and make to rise again, expecting to fall over any second. Five seconds pass. Then ten. I take a step. Good. Strong. I laugh full of happiness and relief.

Walking into the kitchen. I see Mortifer preparing something to eat. He smiles.

"Did you have a question for me...oof!"

I had wrapped him up in the biggest hug I could manage, which felt rather foreign to me, I wonder why?

"Thank you." I say softly.

"Not a problem." He replies, seeming a bit at a loss of what to do, so I release him after a few moments.

"So how *did* you do that?" I ask again.

"Well you see..."

Two weeks later...

Nancy's P.O.V.

It seems like it has been so long since we younger ones had gotten together. By we younger ones I mean Jonathan, me, and Mike's group, to include Kate and El.

We step through the lodge entryway calling out to announce our presence. Footsteps are heard coming from the basement.

Really, even in a totally different house they still choose to hang out in the basement?

I see Mike and El come up first. As soon as they see us they rush over to engulf us in warm hugs. The others come up behind them and follow suit until we are just a circle of hugs. I see Mortifer come up the steps last and smile at the scene, but he makes no effort to join in. I beckon him over, but he just shakes his head and smiles.

Once the hug is broken we all start catching up.

"How's the married life sis?" Mike humorously pokes at me.

"Why don't you find out?" I shoot back with a smirk, and am rewarded to seeing my little brother's face flush. Gotcha.

...

After a little while of playing boardgames Mortifer stands up.

"Guys, I have an announcement." He declares.

"You're finally letting me set you up with someone?" I guess.

"You're getting a dog?" Kate chimes in.

He chuckles. "No, and no. The thing is, I have another new friend I'd like you guys to meet. But I need you to keep an open mind, and, frankly, to not go crazy once you see who it is."

We all go silent. He had our attention as soon as he told us about his having a new friend, but the rest made us, or at least me, uneasy.

"Well go on and bring them down." Dustin urged impatiently, clearly not worried.

Mortifer hesitantly nodded and disappeared upstairs.

"Who do you think it is?" Asked Lucas.

"Maybe another like person like El and Kate." Will supplies.

"Maybe..." I grant, growing impatient waiting already, but before you know it we hear footsteps coming down. We see Mortifer first, who smiles a bit nervously, then the person behind him. First we see her legs, her figure, which was out of this world, then her face...

The whole room stood frozen as we realized just *who* was standing in front of us. I instinctively summon my true sword to my hand with a loud *crack* snapping from the air, I hear the others do the same, and I make to rush our enemy. My feet don't move though, I look down at them in confusion, before realizing...I look back up at Mortifer, who has adopted a serious aura.

"There will be no violence in this house." He states, voice hard.

I can't believe it. He *knows* who this person is. Why is she not dead yet?

"Now then, this is Denise." He goes on.

"We know who *she* is." I hiss venomously.

"She tried to kill us!" Mike adds.

The young woman looks so confused I almost feel bad for her. Almost.

"Morty, what are they..." She starts.

"That is enough everyone." Mortifer says, ignoring her question. "I understand you may take issue with the past regarding her, but I ask you to remember what I have taught you about grudges, and hate. I also request to each one of you personally, that you would find it in your heart to welcome her rather than reject her."

There is a long, heavy silence.

Until suddenly Lucas's weapons disappear, and he strides over to face Denise. He nods to Mortifer, who nods back, and turns around to look at El.

"I made the mistake of rejecting you all that time ago." He says, voice low. "Look at us all now. I don't want to make that sort of mistake again." He turns back to Denise and holds out his hand. "Hello there Denise, if you're okay in Morty's book, then you're okay in mine." Denise smiles, and shakes his hand.

"Thank you." She beams.

El was the next to step forward, then Mike, until everyone, including myself, had done the same.

"So, how did you meet?" I ask.

It was just El, Kate, Denise, and I having some girl time.

"Oh, I guess he kind of came to my rescue." She laughed.

"Really? That seems to be a common trend with him." I muse. Kate and El chuckle.

"Really? Like how?" Denise asks.

"Saved me from Upside-down." El said.

"From what?" Denise seemed lost.

"From a terrible alternate dimension." I clarify, and laugh when I see her eyebrows shoot up. "I know, but it's true." She takes a few moments to absorb this, before nodding.

"He saved me from the government. In their own seat of power too." Kate adds on. Denise, though still a little surprised by this, seems to have far less difficulty accepting it. She looks at me expectantly.

"You too?"

I grimace at the memory, especially since the very person whom had been behind it was currently standing in front of me.

"Err, yeah. I'd prefer not to talk about it though." El and Kate give me knowing looks, while Denise accepts this and respects my wishes.

We all make small talk for awhile. Another question crosses my mind, and I make a mental note to ask Mortifer about it later. The question was how or why hadn't Denise aged over the years? I know Mortifer hadn't either, but I'd always figured he was special. But seeing Denise in a similar condition was a little perplexing for me.

"Is he really the way he is?" She asks suddenly, a hint of uncertainty in her voice.

"What do you mean?" Kate inquires.

"Is he actually...I don't know...kind, considerate, loving?" She fumbles out.

Oh...oh this was going to be good.

"Yes." El answers immediately. "He is just as good as he appears to be."

"Definitely loving." Kate chimes in. "He's our guardian."

Denise seems to mull this over in her head for awhile.

"So he loves all of you." It is more of a statement than a question. "How do you know?"

We all look at each other and smile.

"Just watch him, you'll see." El says easily.

"Yeah. You'll see it in practically everything he does." Says Kate.

"Why do you ask?" I try to seem nonchalant. Her face scrunches up a bit.

"No reason." She says softly, seeming lost in thought.

No reason indeed.

Two more weeks after

Selenia's P.O.V.

I enjoyed the cold hitting my face. A nice change from what I am so often accustomed to. It was starting to get colder out nowadays and I was not complaining. Everything always seemed a bit too warm for me anyway.

There was still a little time before I needed to head home, which served me just fine. I was just having fun skateboarding around the whole town. It was still just me doing so alone since I wasn't confident in my abilities to make friends yet. That's alright though, it could be worse.

It could be a lot worse.

After awhile of admiring the outside world, I decide to try and start learning some tricks on my skateboard. Why? Because I'm a masochist, that's why.

It took me a surprisingly long time to completely and utterly fail. I brace myself, in the air, for the impact...that never happened because someone caught me.

I look up in surprise at a young handsome man of dark complexion. He sets me back on my feet quickly and hands me my skateboard.

"T-thanks." I stutter. Hey, I had almost died and was in front of the

most handsome young man I'd ever seen, so sue me.

"No problem." He smiles. "You alright though?"

"Yeah..." Wow, come on Selenia, say something!

"Good. I hope you have a good rest of your day." He says, and turns to leave.

Come on. Come on. Come on!

"I'm Selenia!" I blurt out at his back, immediately wanting to kick myself. I would not blame him if he just left.

But he doesn't. He turns right around and walks back over.

"I'm Lucas." He says warmly.

Lucas. That's a good name. Quick! Do something normal.

I jut out my left hand in greeting and say, "Nice to meet you, Lucas."

He looks at my outstretched hand in amusement, making me realize I'd stuck out the wrong one, before he takes it and gives it a firm shake.

"Nice to meet you too." He responds, then glances down at our hands and frowns. Crap. I've haven't let go yet. I do so and ask the first thing that comes to mind.

"So you come here often?" God damnit Selenia.

He chuckles, but seems perplexed at something. "No, just visiting family. You?"

"I live nearby, with my parents."

"Cool. That's a neat tattoo."

My blood runs cold. He'd noticed that? He sure is observant.

"T-thanks?" I reply, glancing at my wrist.

There is a small pause.

"Hey, you seem pretty cool-"

I feel a little lighter.

"-would you like to hang out with my friends and I sometime?"

Um...am I making a friend? Is this actually happening?

"That sounds great." I respond cheerfully.

"Awesome, well here's my number. Just give me a call if you want to meet up sometime."

"I will!" I promise.

"Great!" He says enthusiastically, and takes off down the sidewalk.

Could not ask for a better day.

The next day...

Mortifer's P.O.V.

A knock is heard on the door.

I withdraw from my meditation and psychic vigil.

"I can get it!" I hear Denise call out.

"No, I'll get it!" I call back, already heading down the stairs. I open the door to see Lucas and smile, glad to be of his company.

"Mortifer." He says quickly, his tone urgent. "Can we speak alone?"

"Sure." I'm a tad thrown off but it's Lucas so it must be important. "Come in, let's head to the basement." He nods, and follows me down, taking the seat across from me.

"So what is it Lucas? You look as though you've seen a demagorgen." He cracks a smile at this before speaking.

"I met a girl yesterday..."

"Alright..."

"She had 009 tattooed on her forearm, near the wrist." He states.

This actually renders me speechless.

"Please explain."

And he does. By the end of it, he has given me much to ponder.

"So what do you think?" Lucas asks.

"I think I will see what she has been doing all this time, and go from there." I say slowly.

"Cool. When?"

"Now." I close my eyes and reach out my psychic will to this Selenia.

And I see everything.

Her time in the lab.

Her being transported to a site for extermination, and setting everyone and everything ablaze there.

Her fleeing and hiding in the woods until a couple finds her and takes her in. They raise her, and she grows up safe, loved, and just a bit lonely.

I open my eyes and look at Lucas, who is already looking at me expectantly.

"We are all already on the path set to clash with that of the Old One and the Upside-down." I start. "But she is not. She has a family, a whole life apart from this. Until it is made unavoidable, it should stay that way."

Lucas looks at me awhile before speaking up.

"I understand. Will I be able to see her at all?"

I smile. "Yes, of course. She could really use some friends."

"Cool." He gets up to leave, making his way to the door, but turns around to look at me.

"Thanks Morty. I don't know what we'd do without you." He says sincerely, doing a number on my heart, before turning around again and leaving all together.

I sigh to no one in particular.

I don't know what we'd do without you.

Well, my dear Lucas, you'll all have to figure that out one day, and that day may come sooner than you're ready for.

13. That's Why

Two months later

El's P.O.V.

I feel a knowing smile creep onto my face as I watch Morty and Denise prepare the next meal. Or a more accurate term would be watching Morty try and teach Denise how to cook things properly. Denise let out another warm, also embarrassed, laugh which made Morty grin with delight.

I look over at Mike, whom is positioned next to me, and always will be if I have anything to say about it. He returns my knowing smile.

"What do you think?" He asks.

"She likes him."

"No, really?" He feigns surprise, causing me to playfully punch him in the shoulder.

"What do you think mouthbreather?" I ask, using the old insult as a term of endearment. He chuckles before answering.

"I think she's falling for him--" I give him the 'You don't say' look. "-but she is still having trouble believing his love. Whether it be for her, or us. It's like she doesn't believe such a thing is possible."

My eyes widen in surprise and admiration for the boy who had taken me in all those years ago. How does he see so much?

"She doesn't believe that people can love?" I seek clarification.

"Exactly, or at least she seems to see things in a give and take sort of way. So, being around all of us has been confusing her to no end. It's like all that she believes is being turned upside down. But, part of her looks like it's starting to believe it."

I nod as we watch the two in silent amusement. We grin as we see Denise sneaking in secret adoring glances. I watch extra carefully for

any outward sign from Mortifer, but he is just acting as his usual self. Finally, I nudge Mike again.

"Hm...?"

"Does he love her?" I ask.

"Of course he loves her. It's him."

I sigh. "No, I mean does he *love* her?"

He chuckles, as if knowing that's what I meant all along. "Can't tell. Come to think about it, I've never seen him express being attracted to anybody."

"Hm...maybe he's scared too?" I take a shot in the dark.

"What do you mean?" Mike's face scrunches up a bit.

"Well, he never seems to expect anything from anyone, or at least not for a while. He doesn't expect people to care about him, to value his being there. So it'd make sense that he wouldn't expect anything from Denise yet." This time it's Mike's turn to look at me impressed.

"You might be right." He concedes with a slight frown. "That's kind of sad don't you think?"

I nod has we keep watching the two.

Kate's P.O.V.

I stride into the room and see Mike and El staring with knowing grins at the kitchen. I silently make my way over to them and follow their line of sight, only to feel a grin form across my face as well.

"Oh yeah." I whisper. "*That* is so happening one of these days."

"You sure?" El seems a little doubtful. "He doesn't seem to see her that way yet."

"But he will." I assure her.

"Hey guys." Morty calls out, causing us all to snap our heads up a

little too quickly. "Can you get the others? The food is ready."

"Sure." We all say in unison and shuffle off.

Denise's P.O.V.

After lunch, everyone went outside to have some good-natured fun.

If by good-natured fun, you mean having heated sparing matches.

Mike had won against Will and Lucas already, but that was to be expected since Mike did best in straight open combat. He extended a helping hand to Lucas, who took it with a chuckle.

"Damn man. Next gateway, you've got point."

"You got it." Mike lets out a warm laugh. I try very hard to see a trace of pride in his eyes but can find none.

"You're up Dustin!" Lucas calls out.

"What? Hell no, man."

"Don't be a chicken."

"We are nineteen years old and you're still using the term 'chicken'?"
Dustin sniggers.

"Better believe it. Now go." Lucas insists, but gets an idea. You can tell by the way his eyes light up. "Or...you can go, Denise."

My eyebrows shoot up.

"Wh-what?"

"Only if you want." Mike amends for his friend. I look at Mortifer, who has an odd look on his face.

You don't have to.

It's okay.

"Sure." I agree, feeling a sinking feeling in my stomach as I position

myself in front of Mike. Oh God, how was I going to do this? But to my complete surprise my body assumes a fighting stance on reflex. I see Mike observe this with curious eyes before speaking up.

"Ready?"

"Ready." I answer, and kick off the ground towards him, I see his eyes widen in surprise, but he proceeds to deflect my incoming blows with ruthless efficiency. Seeing my apparent lack of progress, I shift tactics, allowing him to throw blows of his own. I duck and weave around him with a finesse I didn't know I possessed. It was as though I'd done this hundreds of times. Mike, to his credit, was definitely amongst the top two most formidable warriors I'd ever gone up against.

Odd. I can't seem to remember who held the number one spot in my life.

We continue to exchange blows and parries, me landing the occasional good shot when he would just barely overreach. This went on for like two minutes before Mike held out his hand in surrender.

"I yield." He gasps out.

Part of me wants to cheer but a bigger part of me is more confused than ever. I look at the others only to catch their peculiar expressions. I look at Mortifer.

"Who am I?"

He is silent.

"Please, tell me who I am." I all but beg. The others tense but I don't care. This is too important. I hold Mortifer's gaze.

"Please." I whisper.

He walks over to me, expression solemn...and a little pained.

"Okay. I can restore the parts of you that were lost, but you have to understand...you may never be the same."

I look around at everyone, taking in the people who had accepted me, and treated me with care.

They love me I think.

I think I love them too.

But the truth is the truth. Things in this world can change, but the truth remains constant. Immovable. As much as people would like to deny it. I gather my resolve, turning back to Mortifer, and almost feel it crumble.

I think...I think I love him too. I think I wouldn't mind spending the rest of my days with him. In fact, I feel a part of me desiring nothing more.

But...I have to know...because...because...

"The truth is the truth." I let out shakily. "Please...do it." He nods and places a hand on my head. I feel a familiar warmth filling me.

And I remember everything.

What am I doing?

Do I really think these people could love me? That I could love them? I tried to kill them. All of them! No, this angelic being was just using me for something. I didn't know for what, but something.

His name is Mortifer...he's your frien-

Shut up!

Nobody can actually love. It just doesn't make sense. My joy belongs to me, and could not possibly extend to him.

But look at him...just look at him.

I do and feel the war in me intensify when I look into his eyes that are full of concern.

He's cares about you.

No! It's not possible!

Get a grip!

Kate's P.O.V.

We all watch as we see the flow of contrasting facial expressions play out amongst our new friend's face. She looks hate filled, then desperate, and so on, back and forth.

Finally, she seems to level out, her expression becoming neutral.

"Denise, are you alright?" Morty asks carefully. Her face contorts to one of pain again before she nods stiffly.

"Y-yeah." She chokes out, her eyes cast to the ground. "Can we...can we go play D&D, or something?"

"Of course." Morty says gently with a smile. "Let's go." He makes for the door with Denise, gesturing for us to follow him, but we remain standing, unsure of the state of our friend's mind.

It is when they are a few yards from the door that we hear the crack sound emanate through the air. Our confusion turns to horror when we see the wretched dark blade piecing through the side of our savior's abdomen. He gasps in pain that doesn't just seem physical and collapses to his knees. I see a sadistic evil look stretching across Denise's face in a feral grin. But then I see it shatter as she realizes exactly what she had just done. Her face becomes one of complete distraught, as she pulls her hands to her face screaming, "No! No! I didn't want...how could I?! Leave! Leave *now*!"

El, on the other hand, is having none of it. She waves her hand and sends Denise flying into the nearest tree. "Mike!" She shouts. "The blade! He can't heal!" Mike gets the message and runs over to Morty, placing one hand on his shoulder. "Sorry Mort." He says before gripping the handle. The next moment he is sent flying a couple feet away, clenching his hand in agony.

"Don't touch it!" He commands. "It won't let you!" He gestures for Will and Dustin to stand watch over Denise. They do so and take rope to restrain her. She may be unconscious but that won't last very long.

"Kate!" El calls out for me, I look at her frantically. "Ready a bolt!" I stare for full second before complying, gathering my psychic will to me. I see El's nose begin to bleed before she shakes away her focus and mutters, "Just checking." The next moment Morty's body lifts up and turns so he is facing me, restrained from moving by El's powers. Still I hear his gasps of agony.

"Hit it Kate!" El practically bellows. I hesitate, unsure of myself but shake this away.

Morty needs me.

I jump up and send the most accurate bolt I had fired to date at the blade's tip. The weapon was sent shooting out into a nearby tree. Morty falls to the ground the next second, El clearly having let him down, and to our total relief we see a mass of white fire filling the nearly gaping hole in his abdomen. Ten seconds pass. Then twenty. Then sixty, before we finally see flesh back where it was supposed to be. Morty gets up and smiles at us.

"Well handled everyone." His voice comes out strong. We all reach our breaking point and rush over to him, wrapping him up in hugs. He laughs warmly. "Now, now everyone. I'm not dead yet."

I let out a choked sob, punching him affectionately.

After we all separate, Will addresses the elephant in the room.

"So, what do we do with Denise?" He asks, his voice low and dangerous.

I see something resembling hate for the first time in Morty's eyes. He walks over to his betrayer, kneeling in front of her.

Denise's P.O.V.

I open my eyes, instantly feeling pain shooting through my side. I try to move but can't. I look down at myself and discover I am restrained in ropes.

And then I remember everything.

Oh no. Oh please tell me I didn't...

I look up and see Mortifer kneeling in front of me, alive, and it's as though a massive boulder has been lifted off my chest.

That was until I saw his eyes. I could feel a sickening feeling in my stomach as I felt the intensity of his piercing glare. I could feel his wrath, his hurt at my betrayal, his disappointment. I wouldn't let myself turn away from it, I deserved it, all of it.

"Are you okay?" He spoke evenly, and I swear it was worse than if he'd lashed out at me. Verbally or physically. No, this, this was so much worse.

"Y-yes." I barely whisper.

He nods and stands up, turning to face the others.

"She is forgiven by me." He states, and I look up at him in disbelief. "She has fully realized the error of her ways, and I am certain we need not fear another event like this one."

Everyone is silent, in shock, including me, at his outrageous words. Will finally speaks up.

"I understand, Mortifer. I think I really do." He says with a small smile. "But this is all a little fresh. I think it would be best if we all leave for now and sort this out."

Mortifer smiles genuinely for the first time since speaking with me. "A very wise advisement indeed, Will. Everyone, thank you to no end. Make no mistake, you did save my life today, but Will is right. You will need time to deal with what just happened."

With that they all exchanged goodbye hugs and departed until finally it was just me and him.

"Mortifer I..." I say softly. He turns around to face me.

"Yes?" He prompts.

"I'm so sorry." I whisper, feeling pathetic. He stares for a few

moments before nodding.

"I know." He turns and starts walking inside. I don't even call out because I deserve to be out here tied to this damn tree. But just as I think that the ropes suddenly fall down, a clear cut made through every one of them. I look back up at Mortifer in confusion.

"You coming? It's getting cold out here." He calls out, not turning around while disappearing into the doorway.

I shuffle to my feet and run inside, finding him and hugging him from behind. I feel him go stiff and make no effort to return the embrace. My hearts breaks a little but I understand.

But I just keep holding him, needing to feel him near me.

One week later

It has been a week since the incident, and things are going...good.

The others had been by throughout the week. Each one hugging me and telling me it was alright. Right now, I was hanging out with El, Mike's girlfriend, and, if we're being honest, eventual wife.

"So..." She says after our last topic of nonimportance. "How are you two doing?"

I look down, feeling a bit distraught. "We are...okay." I finally say, knowing I didn't sound the least bit convincing. El just stares at me. I sigh, and settle on telling the truth. "I know I deserve it." I start. "But he is keeping me an arm's length away, you know? We used to cook together, clean together, everything. But now he just politely tells me that he's got it handled. I know it doesn't seem like much but..." My eyes start to water a little bit. "...I miss being close to him, you know?"

El nods compassionately and takes me into a hug. I have to strain to hold it together. "I get it." She comforts.

"You do?"

"Yeah. Mike and I had problems at one point. It was horrible." She

frowns at the memory. "I think with Morty, you just need to give him time. I mean, not to make you feel bad, but you did hurt him. On multiple levels."

I nod knowing she was right. I mean I had literally stabbed him in the back. The fact that he hasn't sought vengeance was just testament to his character.

"I know." I sigh. "I just wish he would hug me, or even just say my name."

"He hasn't spoken to you?" El asks, confused.

"No, I mean he just hasn't said my name, and it's driving me crazy." I sulk.

El's lips slowly curl up and her eyes light up a bit.

"Why?" She asks.

"Probably to distance me or something..." I shrug miserably.

"No, I mean why does it matter to you that *he* says your name?"

I hesitate, then open my mouth to speak, but shut it when nothing comes out.

El raises her eyebrows, an all too knowing look on her face.

"He's my friend and I..." I try to get out.

"Friends don't lie." El rebukes.

I sigh again knowing she's right and put my face in my hands.

"I love him, don't I?" I groan out in despair.

"Afraid so." I can practically feel her smile. My heart lifts, then plummets when I remember the current situation.

"I'm so screwed."

"No, just give him time, remember? He'll heal, and things will get

better again." She states with confidence.

I lower my hands and look at her hopefully. "You think so?"

"I know so."

And I believed her.

Two days pass

I walk down the stairs, hearing breakfast being prepared. I walk by the kitchen, catching a glimpse of Mortifer moving about, and head to clean up the small mess left by the boys during their D&D match. After a couple seconds, I sigh quietly, wishing I was doing something else with someone else right now.

I am startled by a knock on the doorframe. I look and see Mortifer standing there. He lets out a warm smile. "Denise, would you please assist me with breakfast this morning?"

I feel the air catch in my lungs, a smile of undiluted happiness and relief spreads across my face unbidden. I nod my head vigorously and he lets out a good-hearted laugh.

"Well come on." He smiles wider, holding out his hand invitingly, and I feel the tension of the past week dissipate at last. No longer able to restrain myself I rush to him and he encompasses me in the warm hug I've been desiring the whole week. I allow myself to break down, sobbing into his embrace as I clench the back of his shirt. "Now, now Denise." He speaks softly. "It's alright. Everything's okay."

I nod, shaking in his arms, before finally managing to speak.

"Y-yeah. Now everything's okay."

The next day

Mortifer's P.O.V.

The first thing I heard upon leaving the house was the thing I least wanted to hear.

ANGEL. WE MUST HAVE WORDS.

So early in the morning?

YES.

I sigh a sigh capable of rivaling even those of Mike Wheeler.

Alright. What is it?

YOU ARE SHELTERING A TRAITER TO MY RANKS. TURN HER OVER.

Why? She is of no use to you.

IT IS SIMPLY DESTROYING THAT WHICH IS MINE TO DESTROY. WE HAVE A COVENANT.

Well that makes this complicated...

Can it be broken?

ONLY BY MY WILL.

What if we make another deal?

...

I AM LISTENING.

Well this solution has typically worked in the past so...

I groan, practically already feeling what this'll mean for me.

I tell my offer, and can practically feel its eagerness.

IF YOU GO THROUGH WITH IT, AND ALL OF THEM ARE THERE TO SEE IT, THEN I WILL DISSOLVE THE COVENANT WITH MY FORMER CHAMPION.

Not all of them. You really think I am so foolish as to bring all my forces

to be possibly ambushed?

FAIR. BRING THE SEVEN YOU LOVE THE MOST.

I hesitate, feeling a little sick at the thought.

Fine.

GOOD. I WILL BE EXPECTING YOU TONIGHT.

With that the connection was broken. I let out one more sigh, and walk back into the lodge.

Denise sees me and instantly hugs me, which I return. She had been a bit touchier then she used to be. Maybe I had really hurt her during that time I distanced myself, and now she was making up for it. Yeah, that must be it.

"Good morning, Mortifer." She says dreamily, releasing me from her hold.

"Good morning, Denise." I reply, and see her face light up. I raise an eyebrow and feel my smile return as per usual. She sees my inquiring gaze and just shrugs happily before clarifying.

"I just...like it when you say my name." She confesses, and I have to resist the urge to let my mouth drop open. Okay, I understand that I may not be the best at measuring what worth people hold me in, but a declaration like that is obvious even to me. Should I have expected this to be the case...I don't know, maybe? I am honestly at a total loss of how to go about handling this kind of situation, especially since I hadn't even considered the possibility.

Or maybe I'm just overthinking this. It has been known to happen.

"Well, I'm glad I can be source of happiness for you." I respond after a beat, and see her smile grow. Yeah see? Just overthinking it.

You don't believe that for one second do you?

The answer to that is irrelevant.

"Hey Denise, I need you and the others to come with me tonight."

She nods, seeming determined to follow me anywhere. "What should we bring?"

"Weapons. We are going to see the Old One." I see her eyes widen in fear, and place a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "Don't be afraid. It will not harm you." I pause, weighing my options. "In fact, this is for your safety." I confess.

Her eyes go from fear to anguish. "Mortifer, I...I don't want anyone...anyone to..."

"Relax." I reassure her. "We are all coming back. I promise."

"...okay."

El's P.O.V.

We all enter the portal and emerge back to the same place we'd met the Old One before. It was already waiting with a look of anticipation. None of the others knew what was supposed to happen, but Morty approached me with the details, giving me a single, terrible task.

Do not let anyone interfere.

GOOD OF YOU ALL TO COME.

"Yeah, yeah. Deal still on?" Morty asks dryly.

THAT IT IS.

He looks back at us, despair lacing his features. "Sorry, you all have to see this." He says sorrowfully.

"See what?" Lucas asks, his anxiousness clearly showing in his voice.

YOU DID NOT TELL THEM?

Morty remains silent.

"Tell us what?" Lucas presses.

I DEMANDED MY CLAIM ON THE ASSASSIN MASTER, BUT HE CONVINCED ME TO RELINQUISH HER FROM MY GRASP.

"By doing what?" Mike chimes in, and I feel guilty for not telling him.

I MAY HARM HIS BODY FOR AN HOUR HOWEVER I CHOOSE. HE WILL USE HIS GIFT TO REGENERATE FROM EVERY WOUND I TELL HIM TO SO THAT HIS PAIN REMAINS UNPARALLELED, AND YOU ALL ARE TO WATCH.

"Mortifer no!" Denise is about to dart to him but for some reason her feet don't move. She looks at me, confused. So, does everyone else.

"Please no." She whispers to me, begging me to reconsider my stance, but I knew that Morty knew what he was doing. I shake my head sadly.

We all watch helplessly as Morty is levitated off the ground towards the Old One.

And that was when the real nightmare started.

We looked on as the abomination tore parts of our friend's flesh off and proceeded to throw such strips of meat to the crowd of monsters that greedily gobbled them down. I scream, unable to help myself, feeling in agony watching my rescuer suffer such atrocities. The others were yelling too. Either at the Old One, the monsters, or me. But I wouldn't let them interfere, because if I did all this would be for nothing, and we wouldn't save Denise. Morty would never get over something like that, I just knew it.

To make matters so much worse than they already were, Morty was indeed regenerating gaps in his body only to have them ripped out again. He howled in pure agony, and kept howling until there was nothing left of his voice. I made my way to Denise's side.

"Why? Why is he doing this?" She squeaks out to no one in particular.

"Because..." I answer through my tears. "Because *that* is how much he loves you Denise." I see her break down even more, and pull her into

a hug. We are joined by the others and we all continue to watch in total misery as our friend and guardian is tortured in ways before inconceivable.

An eternity later, the hour ends and the Old One releases its grip on our Grey Angel who instantly shifts to that very form.

"The deal is accomplished." He speaks, sounding so hoarse and scarred. "Now honor your side." The Old One nods and raises one of its, sort of, hands. Suddenly, something black and blurry is pulled out of Denise and absorbed back into the dark being.

I SUSPECT THE NEXT TIME WE MEET, IT WILL BE FOR THE FINAL BATTLE, GREY ANGEL.

"I agree. Until then." He makes for the gateway and we all follow suit. We all reemerge in the Rightside-up a moment later.

"Now guys I know I should have told you-" He is cut off by the group hug that he really should have seen coming.

"It's okay. We understand." Kate says.

"Yeah." Dustin adds, followed by the rest giving their affirmations.

"Hey guys..." He chuckles. "I know that was a lot, like really a lot, but would you mind if I just went to sleep for...like two days?" We all laugh or giggle a little and say our goodbyes, telling him we'll be stopping in here and there, which he warmly welcomes.

He makes for the lodge and looks back at Denise.

"Would you please join me?" He requests holding out his hand. Denise, having not said a word this whole time, just walks over to him and places her hand in his. They wave as they walk off.

Thank you. I know that must have been hard for you.

It's okay. Friends would do anything for each other.

I feel his smile. *That's right. See you soon El.*

You too Morty.

Denise's P.O.V.

Mortifer lies down in bed and I'm just staring at him through the doorway.

"Yes Denise?" He inquires, sensing my stare.

"Why?" I ask.

He sighs, and sits up to look at me.

"Because you are very precious to me. Because to me you were worth it. Because I wanted to give you a chance to live a life of light and love, to finally be free of the dark. That's why" He says this as though it's the most obvious thing in the world, a whole different fire igniting his eyes. I stare at him dumbfounded, for a few moments before he lies back down.

Oh no. You do not get to say all *that* and expect nothing to come of it. I rush forward and crawl on top of him, and start kissing his forehead, cheeks, nose, jaw, and neck. He starts giggling, I noise I instantly decide I love.

"Denise!" He laughs a bit. "What are you doing?"

"Kissing you." I say simply.

"But why?" I sit up on him with a slight pout.

"That should really be obvious don't you think?"

I see his eyes widen at my bold declaration.

"Can we talk about it in the morning Denise? There are really a couple things you should know before you consider something like this with me." He says this gently, carefully.

I nod. "On one condition." I say grinning.

"And what might that be?" He inquires with an amused smile.

"I get to sleep here. With you." I state fearlessly.

I may have seen the slightest trace of redness touch his cheeks, but maybe it was just my imagination.

"Alright." He concedes, and I do a victory lap in my head. "But don't go getting any funny ideas." He teases, making it my turn to blush.

"I would never." I exclaim dramatically.

14. The Rules

Selenia's P.O.V.

Come on, just *do* it. It's not hard, doesn't have to be weird, just do it.

I muster up my courage and dial the number. There are a few rings and then...

"Hello?" Lucas greets, and I almost hang up.

"Hi." I manage weakly. "It's Selenia."

"Oh! Selenia hi!" I can hear the smile in his voice and feel the awkwardness briefly leave me. "I'm glad to hear from you. What's up?"

"Uh, I didn't really have anything to do today, so I was hoping you and I could get together..." I trail off.

"Sounds great! Is there anything you wanted to do?"

"Nothing specific. Anything will work."

"Alright, I guess I'll meet you where we first ran into each other." He chuckles at the memory, and I can't help but giggle too.

"See you in thirty." I agree.

"Until then." He chirps and hangs up. I take a brief moment to congratulate myself on my bravery. That is until I realized the predicament I had laughed at so many of my 'friends' for.

I now had to decide what to wear.

After about ten minutes of scouring my entire wardrobe and still being undecided, I make myself calm down.

Come on Selenia. Lucas seems like a good guy. He won't care what you're wearing, provided you're at least wearing something.

I throw on some decent clothes, not too showy, nor too plain, and grab my skateboard from the garage. It was already almost too icy outside to use it but still. As I walk outside, I feel the familiar cold hit me and smile.

I wonder if anyone's morning could possibly be going better than mine right now?

Mortifer's P.O.V.

I open my eyes to the usual sunlight peeking through the blinds and smile at the gift of being able to awaken here again. It is another day I'll be able look after others, whether I know them personally or not.

After a few moments of mentally preparing myself for the day I realize something odd.

It is warm in this bed today. Like *a lot* warmer. I take in my surroundings, by default noticing the beautiful young woman snuggled up against me, fully clothed mind you, and feel my heart get a whole lot warmer too. Seeing her like this, peaceful and vulnerable feels like an honor I really don't deserve. So, after a while of observing her slumber, I make myself wake her up.

"Morning Denise." I whisper softly, nudging her a little. She opens her eyes sleepily and grins affectionately.

"Morning Mortifer." She breathes contently, and readjusts herself so that she is pressed up against me harder. Even I have to take a moment to realign my thoughts after this before I can continue. "Denise." I urge. "Are you ready to talk today?"

Her eyes snap open, as though she is just realizing something, and looks at me flushing redder then I'd ever seen her in the past.

"This...this isn't a dream?" She asks quietly, still a little unsure.

My smile broadens. "Not at all, but if you want we can pretend it is for a while longer." She shakes her head.

"No, this is better." She states firmly. "I'm ready to talk."

"Good, let's go make breakfast first real quick though, alright?" I prompt cheerfully, to which she nods but doesn't move.

A few seconds pass.

"Um Denise..."

"Hm...?" She hums obviously.

"I kind of need you to untangle yourself from me to...you know...get up." I can't help but blush slightly. She lets out an embarrassed "Oh!" and frees me from her clutches. Did I want to be freed? Not necessarily, but hey, there is work to be done, and things that needed discussing. I get up and head to the kitchen, with her trailing close behind me. We make breakfast quickly, and sit down on the living room sofa.

"So..." She speaks up after a little bit.

"Yes?"

"Can we talk about what you mentioned last night?" She seems eager, making my heart clench.

"Sure, um, where to start?" I pause a moment, and she just waits patiently. "You should know what exactly I am, why I am here, and where I came from." I look at her questioningly. She just nods, ready for what I have to reveal to her. "It would be so much easier if I just showed you. Is that okay?"

She smiles, a hint of humor in her eyes. "Do you even have to ask, Mortifer?" I chuckle nervously and gently place a hand on her cheek. She leans into it happily, then closes her eyes in preparation of what's to come.

After a couple beats I shut mine too, and plunge us into that memory that was such a pivotal point in my history, and possibly many, many others.

Before...

I sat down in an empty chamber, set the Guardian fortress known as,

The Immovable. A great crown was atop my head, though make no mistake, this was not meant to signal royalty or authority, but instead a great mantle of vigilance.

My mind wasn't like it was before the Battle of the Gateway now. It was vastly expanded and complex. Where before it would have been a fool's errand for me to try and multi-task, these days my focus was spread across many different battlefields and realities. I lent my power, strength, and knowledge when and where it was needed. Sometimes I'd have to intervene directly, but those circumstances were always ended quickly.

This had been the way of things for me for quite a while now, and one thing kept becoming more and more apparent.

It wasn't enough. I wasn't enough.

So, I called in what people were naming nowadays a 'frenemy'.

When it made its entrance, I didn't even have to look. The power seeping from it made it self-evident.

"You requested my presence, Mortifer?" Said a male voice. I guess that's what it decided to go with today.

"I did. I need your knowledge regarding a matter of great importance." I declared.

"Well, don't keep me in suspense." He said dryly.

I finally turn around to look at him, seeing the epitome of all things princely, and begin to make my case.

"Given what you are..." I start and he sighs.

"Not this again. I have no desire to discuss the mysteries of the universe with you *again*, Mort."

"That's not it." I wave off quickly, earning a doubtful glance. "You, Luci, are a fragment, no, a copied fragment of the Great Rebel."

"This I know." He rolls his eyes.

"I need you to help me make more of you...but of me." I propose, looking for his reaction.

He just freezes for a few moments, contemplating the implications of my words.

"So, let me get this straight. What *he* did, you want to do." I nod, his eyes narrow inquisitively. "Why?"

I take a deep breath. "Because with my new mind, and great power, heck, even with this crown created by the Descendant of Eden...I am not enough. I am not able to reach those that are in desperate need of aid."

"And this is all your responsibility because..." he pokes.

"I am able. Why would I not lend a helping hand?" I challenge, causing him to grin.

"You know, you really take the whole 'to whom much is given' a little too seriously, you know?" He jokes, and I laugh, feeling a little lighter after not doing so the past week.

"Will you help me?" I ask finally.

He waits a few seconds before answering. "Yes, but only once, and you must set rules against interfering with people's destinies." He pauses to chuckle. "At least not too much."

"Fair." I concede.

"I'm not done." He suddenly snaps sharply. "These types of matters are serious, and I will not have you messing them up like he did." I gesture for him to continue. "Here are the main rules: No excessive destiny interfering unless another outside force makes a play first. Same goes for use of power. No revealing yourself to the world as a whole. Again, only do what is necessary to help whomever you are there to help. If you want to help others, it must be quick, and unmarkable. Lastly, once the threat is nullified, that's it. Your copied fragment had better be dead, or gone, once all is said and done."

I take a long time to mull this over in my mind for a while. The rules

are stringent, but usable enough. Many could still be helped. Although, a peculiar thought occurred to me.

"Will I get their memories?" I ask quietly.

Luci shifts uncomfortably. "I think so, but..." He gestures to himself. "I really couldn't tell you."

I nod solemnly, decision made. "Let's do it then." Luci just sighs.

"As you wish."

I spread my mind to the dimensions I know I will never be able to maintain constant contact with, sensing the destinies of prominence. No real specifics, just feelings, intuitions. I hold them in my mind through immense effort and growl through my teeth. "Now Luci."

Suddenly, I know exactly what to do, the knowledge is given to me, and I create my copied fragments, placing them across time and space.

I sense the one I was sent to aid. She has endured much suffering and pain. But she recently acquired a home, somewhere she desired desperately to be, and it's as though I can sense it calling out to her. But, I can sense the darkness closing in around it too, endangering its very existence.

So, I will have to be in two places at once...

Alright, I've done stranger things.

Denise's P.O.V.

The memory ends, and I open my eyes to see Mortifer watching for my response.

"So, you're a...?" I start.

"Yep."

"Here to help us against the Old One?"

"Pretty much."

"And after you do..." I stop, not wanting to say it.

"I will be gone. One way or the other." He finishes sadly.

"That's why you don't want me to get attached?" I ask, eyes watering a little.

He nods. "I wouldn't want to do that to you. Be with you only to be gone once all is said and done."

I let out a broken laugh. "Well, it's a little too late for that."

He just looks down, and there is silence while I sort things out in my mind.

So, he will be gone eventually. Probably within a year or two.

...

But, then...so might I. Tomorrow, or next week. Something could happen and I could be gone, having never gotten to experience the joy of being under his wing. I didn't want that.

When he's gone, what would hurt me more? Having never gotten to really be with him, or having him and losing him. The answer seemed obvious, but something else was working its way into my mind.

You could just be grateful for all the time you get to have with him, and the impact he has made, and will continue to make on you while he is here.

I take a few more moments to gather myself, before I reach out and lift his chin up to look at me. His eyes look resigned.

"I get it." I whisper to him. "I get it, but if you'll have me, I'd love to

be at your side until the time comes."

He smiles lightly, and I know he's gotten the wrong idea. "Of course! I'd love for-" And I kiss him, interrupting him and trying to convey exactly what I meant by my 'being at his side'. It takes a couple seconds for him to get over his apparent shock, but then he *finally* kisses me back, smiling and laughing a little. This makes me giggle, while I coax him into opening his mouth a little and it's all I need to dart in and explore his mouth. I let out a breathless moan as he does the same to me, feeling on cloud nine.

"Ahem."

We both break apart and look up, faces flushed, at the group's two adorable couples.

"Ha! I told you!" Kate cheered happily. Dustin was clutching his knees in laughter, while El just smiled and gave me a thumbs up. Mike, the other hand, looked like he just stumbled into a golden opportunity.

"I never thought-" He starts, but is interrupted by Mortifer.

"Mike don't you dare."

"That I'd be the one to walk in and interrupt a kiss." He finishes, and Mortifer can't help but laugh.

"So, what's up guys?" I prompt, unable to stop smiling.

"Well besides you two, we were just coming by to see if you guys wanted to go to the movies with us." Dustin replies, holding back more laughter.

"That sounds nice." Mortifer agrees.

"Yeah, give us a little time to get ready." I add.

We get back from the movies, and get ready for bed.

Hm...I wonder if this time...nah, he'd probably say no.

...

Well, he is currently in the shower right now, so maybe if I surprise him...

After a couple more moments contemplation, I make my decision, tossing off my clothes, and try to decide on a seductive pose. I hear the shower click off and just decide on sitting upright on the edge of the bed.

He walks out wearing a t-shirt and shorts, his usual sleeping attire, and stops dead as soon as his eyes land on me. He quickly averts his gaze.

I stand up and walk over to him. "Mortifer." I whisper. "Please, look at me. I want you to see me."

He does after some reluctance, keeping his eyes locked to mine.

"Denise," he chokes out. "What are you doing?"

I smile warmly. "That should really be obvious don't you think?"

There is conflict in his eyes, and suddenly I understand.

"Mortifer, this isn't because you're going to be gone soon. This is because I want to be close to you. Like really, really close." I say, with a nervous giggle, trying to make him understand, and see another shadow cross his demeanor. Another spark of intuition hits me. "Mortifer, do you trust me?"

He nods. "Of course."

I step closer to him, there is less than a foot between us. "Then I want you to know that this...you, I won't take for granted. I will treasure, and value you." I feel my own fire ignite in my eyes. "I will never abandon you as long as I live, and I will keep trying to remind you of that every day if you will just *let me*."

I see the last of his walls fall, and feel my heart soar.

"Promise?" He asks breathlessly.

"Promise." I say, meaning it.

Kate's P.O.V.

After the movies we'd retired to the Wheeler's to roast marshmallows outside on their patio. Smores were always the bomb afterall.

Some time passes, us talking about the future, like college and getting our own apartments and the like. Lucas was still out for the day doing God knows what, and Will was...well I guess we didn't know what he was doing either.

Hey, it was an off day for us. I swear we aren't bad friends.

"So, what do you think Morty's up to?" Mike asks, and we all groan.

"Mike, you remember the last time you asked that question?" Dustin scolds.

"Yeah, that was insane!" I chime in.

"Okay, okay, geez guys." Mike raises his hands in surrender. "It was just a thought. Besides, he's probably just sleeping."

There is a long pause.

"Unless..." El prompts with an evil glint in her eyes, and we all groan again.

"Come on El, don't put that in our minds." Dustin complains.

"Besides, it'd take more than her waving her body in front of him to make *that* happen." I assure. "It is Morty afterall."

"True." El admits.

"Well, maybe she actually did or said something to convince him." Mike provides, doing a complete 180. "And they have been rather close for a while."

This is followed by the typical nay-says of our group, until Mike again surrenders and leaves it alone.

There is a thoughtful silence.

"Well...it couldn't hurt to check, could it?" Dustin states, Mike looks at him incredulously, but I speak up.

"Yeah. They probably are just sleeping and we've been torturing ourselves for nothing." I speak reasonably.

"B-but." Mike stutters.

"We can check." El says.

Mike looks at her, eyes wide, and she clarifies.

"Same as before, but real quick." She says.

After a bit of convincing on Mike's end we join hands.

We see darkness, then one moment later we are in front of the lodge.

El pulls us through the doors and we practically float up the stairs, stopping in front of Morty's bedroom door.

Can't we just listen through the doorway? I think.

Doesn't work like that. El explains. *Has to be in the same place, or, in this case, room.*

We all look at each other.

Come on guys. I urge. *They are probably just sleeping.*

This is probably a little messed up of us, isn't it?

El, finally, takes us in the room. It takes a second for things to come into focus, but when it does...

Let's just say we really regret our decision.

El, pulls us back to our bodies faster than I would have thought possible, and we all open our eyes, turning redder than we had possibly ever seen each other.

"Uhh..." Mike lets out, and we just don't respond.

Dustin abruptly stood up. "We should be getting back." He declares, and I quickly nod my head to agree.

We all exchange awkward goodbyes and part ways.

Once Dustin and I get home, I can't help it, I just can't.

"That was pretty intense." I snigger. Dustin turns red, but chuckles a little.

"It really was. I mean, wow."

"Wow indeed" I agree.

We both stare at each other a little longer than necessary.

"Bed?" I ask.

"Bed." Dustin agrees.

Ten's P.O.V.

"Hey Seven?" I ask as I rip apart another monster that was looking at me for too long, without so much as lifting a finger.

"Yeah Ten?" Seven replies while lying down and playing with the lightning in between her hands.

"You ever get the feeling there's something more to life than power?"

"Says the one who just tore apart a monster on principle?"

"Hey, it's just a habit now." I say defensively. "But, don't you ever wonder?"

Seven pauses to consider this. "Power protects us, keeps us safe."

"Sometimes." I concede. "But you ever wonder why Denise left?"

Seven shrugs. "Probably because you were getting close to outshining her."

"Which means one of two things." I try to be logical. "Either she found something more powerful, or she found something more important."

Seven sits up. "Like what?"

I sigh in frustration. "That's just it. I don't know."

There is a short silence before Seven speaks up again.

"I suggest not thinking about it too much Ten." She advises. "That kind of thing could drive you crazy."

I just sigh again, feeling lost.

"Yeah. You're probably right."

She seems to understand I'm feeling a bit down, the lightning between her hands disappears and she stands up.

"Wanna go mess with that lizard thing again?" She offers, and I smile.

"Yeah. That'd be nice."

15. Calm Before the Storm

One year later...

Seven's P.O.V.

I burst out of my bed in a cold sweat, shaking and breathing heavily.

"You okay Seven?" I hear Ten call out from the next room. This was not the first time this has happened.

"I'm fine!" I yell back, then in a lower tone, "Just the dream again. Go back to sleep."

I hear her settle back into her bed after a brief hesitation. Good, I don't need to worry her with this for the hundredth time. I sigh, and step in front of the mirror, taking in my reflection, and shudder at the dream's memory.

I was holding the enemy back on the field of battle. They had come with fire...so much fire. Still, I had known their time was short. The shear amount of numbers we had to call upon was beyond the counting, but, for the moment, they were advancing. Some of them had these powerful grey weapons, that reminded me of the ones we'd received from the Dark One. Just like ours they were capable of severing nearly anything and everything.

It didn't matter though because none of them had been prepared for my lightning. I forced them to fall back and take cover, until the brute with that terrible grey axe charged in solo, deflecting parts of my lightning with his weapon. Despite his resilience, I eventually force him to his knees, but as I fire a killing strike I see the air around him blur. My lightning smacks into a sort of invisible wall.

That's when I hear a cry of challenge and outrage from another warrior on the battlefield. She has long, flowing golden hair, a shining bracelet adorning her wrist, and an elegant spear clasped in one hand as she makes her way straight to me.

I shake off another shudder as I mentally force myself to dismiss what

came next.

It's only a dream Seven. It's only a dream.

If only.

I make myself crawl back into bed and close my eyes, but the problem with that is it doesn't block out any sort of thoughts. My face twitches as I remember one of the first chilling things those 'scientists' had told me...

The ones before you have failed, and have, as such, been decommissioned. This will not happen to you, because you will become strong.

I learned that strong meant powerful back then. Through a little time, my little electric touch evolved into something so much more. I remember reading one of the few books they had permitted me to read about weather. The thunderstorms had greatly captured my attention back then, forming a single goal, one desire at the time.

I can do better than that.

It was a full year before the chaos erupted that landed me in this world, that I had discovered my precognitive abilities. I had kept my new powers secret from the scientists, choosing not to tell them of the one day when their reckoning would come.

I had been ready when the Dark One sent Denise after me, coming willingly into the fold, knowing the power and authority that would be given to me.

It was only recently that'd I'd begun to see the axe-wielding brute and the golden-haired spear warrior. I wonder for the first time if I had chosen the wrong side.

I shake this off, knowing such thoughts lead to nothing. I am what I am. The Dark One would be too powerful to spurn anyway. Plus...

My visions had always come true.

Meaning this would happen one way or another. This was how the story ended for me.

I clench my blanket tightly in my hands as I come to terms with this again, resolve forming where doubt was before.

I'm ready. I think to myself. *I'm ready for it all to be done.*

Lucas's P.O.V.

"So Lucas..."

I turn to my longtime friend with a smile.

"Yeah Mike?"

"How are you and Selenia?" He asks, trying hard not to smile too wide.

I feel heat rush up to my cheeks and am infinitely grateful for the complexion of my skin.

"We're good..." I try to sound casual.

"That's good." Mike says, clearly seeing through me, but seeming to deem me worthy of mercy.

God bless you Mike Wheeler.

"You know we all like her, right?" He blurts out. "Not that that matters but we do. I'm think even Morty and Denise approve."

Awkwardness aside this does make me smile. Morty had been our guardian since he first appeared and was almost another parent for most of us. For El and Kate, he most certainly was.

"That's...good to know." I manage, then after a pause. "Thanks man."

"Don't mention it." He shrugs, but gives me an earnest expression. "We're just happy you've got someone that appreciates you, and shows it too."

I smile, as my thoughts shift to the redhead that had undoubtedly ensnared my heart.

Past me, if only you could see how things turned out.

But now, it was time to turn the tables.

"So, when are you gonna ask El to marry you Mike?" I ask casually, and Mike almost spits out his drink.

"Wh-what?!" He chokes.

"When. Are. You. Asking. Her?"

He turns a shade of deep red but answers levelly. "Just waiting for the right time. I mean, we're still young with still so much to experience so she might not want to-"

"I'm gonna stop you right there, Mike." I say, raising a hand. "If you really think that...then you wouldn't mind if I called the girls up right now and asked her, would you?" My evil grin is showing and I know it. Mike's eyes narrow.

"You wouldn't dare." He challenges.

"Wouldn't I?" There is silence as we both stare each other down. Then, suddenly, I push off from my position on the couch and make a mad dash up the stairs with Mike close on my heels.

"Lucas! Don't you dare!" Mike yells after me, and I just laugh.

"You brought this on yourself, Mike!" I yell back as I punch in the number to the girls. It rings twice before, as luck would have it, El picks up.

"Hello?" El greets.

Before I can get so much as a hello back, Mike tackles me from the side, knocking the phone from my grasp.

After a bit of wrestling, we call a truce, check the phone, and head back to our game of chess.

"So...you'll be my best man, right?" Mike asks after a while. "When the time comes?"

"Man, you do not even have to ask."

Jonathan's P.O.V.

"Hey Chief."

"Yeah kid?" It weirdly doesn't irk me that he still calls me kid after all this time.

"I've been thinking..." I start but pause, thinking of the right way to word it.

"Thinking?"

"About Mortifer, and how it's odd that he seems to dismiss or be kind of noncommittal whenever events about a year from now come up."

Hopper sits up straighter.

"I mean, I know normal people can be like that too." I continue. "But, he isn't normal people. He does everything with a purpose behind it. So, I can't help but wonder..."

"Why." Hopper finishes. I nod.

"I see where you are coming from." Hopper says after taking a deep breath. "I've noticed a couple things too."

"Like?" I inquire.

"Have you seen the way she looks at him?" He states, seeming random at first but when I really thought about it...

We had all noticed when she had started falling for him, and definitely when she was head over heels. But, when they had finally gotten together she had gotten a slightly different look in her eye. There was happiness sure, adoring love, but also a desperate desire to soak in as much of him as she could, as though she wouldn't always have the opportunity.

It was as if she knew that he wouldn't always be around.

And given his past evasiveness of anything regarding a year from now...

"He is going to die, isn't he?" I whisper, sorrow washing over me.

"Seems like it." Hopper agrees, sounding how I felt.

There is a long silence as we both silently remanence of our past times with our semi-angelic friend. I flash back to Nancy and I's wedding. I was panicking a little on the inside, a part of me wondering if she'd spontaneously change her mind, and decide she didn't want to deal with me for the rest of our lives.

Mortifer, my best man, had laughed, seeing my distress.

"Come now Jonathan." He had said with another chuckle. "She'll come, and she'll look beautiful."

"Yeah, she will." I had said back, believing his reassuring words.

"You know I'm proud of you, right Jonathan?" He spoke suddenly, I look at him.

"You are?"

"Yes." He said firmly. "You have become a good man. You will be able to shape the world for the better around you. Soon, you and Nancy will make the best of teams too, and I am so very happy for you."

I brought him into a hug saying, "Thanks man."

Now I know he'll be gone in probably less than a year.

How does that even make sense? He's become such a big part of our lives. He's taught us so much. I sigh internally, and try to think of what we should do.

Only one thought occurs to me.

"If he can't stop what's coming, then we can't either." I state out loud. "Maybe, we could have a party though. To celebrate our family. The family that's only here because of him."

Hopper nods his head after a little while.

"That doesn't sound like a bad idea."

Will's P.O.V.

I smile in amusement as I watch Dustin try and beat one of the latest videogames.

"Gosh freaking darnit!" He yells and collapses backwards from his seated position and sets down the controller. "You wanna take a shot at it, Will?"

I shake my head with a chuckle. "Nah man, I have enough rage stored inside me." I joke. Dustin widens his eyes in mock shock.

"The Will Byers, full of rage?"

"Could happen man."

"Yeah. The same as pigs being able to fly."

We banter a bit, enjoying it just like old times, before a real subject came up.

"You ever wonder what it would have been like if El and Morty hadn't shown up?" Dustin asks, sounding lost in thought.

"Sometimes." I admit.

"We would have been totally screwed back then, huh?" He went on.

"Definitely, they both saved us." I agree.

A comfortable silence fills the room.

"Next time..." Dustin speaks up. "We'll be able to help. Maybe even make a difference."

"Yeah. We'll do what we can, when we can."

"Hey Will?"

"Yeah?" I say turning to him.

"What do you think Morty and Denise are doing right now?" He asks, and we both laugh. This had become a bit of an inside joke for our little group on account of our past experiences that started with that very question.

"Probably the same thing you and Kate do when you get enough time alone." I tease, and Dustin flushes bright red.

"Wh-what?! What are you talking about?" He stutters.

"Oh, come on! Did you really think we wouldn't know?" I accuse. We didn't know completely for sure, but the two's behaviors from time to time hinted at such activities more than once. Dustin and I banter on a bit, until I finally show him mercy and give it up.

"Will, how come you don't have a girlfriend?" Dustin asks with genuine curiosity.

If I had a nickel for every time I'd heard that...

"It's not time." I say simply.

"How so?" He asks, intrigued.

"It's just not time." I insist. "Maybe one day. I'll be sure to let you know if the time comes." Dustin nods, accepting.

"She'll sure be lucky." He suddenly declares. "Whoever she happens to be."

I chuckle again, albeit secretly touched by my friend's sentiment.

"I hope so."

Mortifer's P.O.V.

"Ready my love?" Denise asks, smiling brightly as she comes into the room, she stops and does a double take. "Oh...I don't know why I asked."

I was wearing a black tux, with pretty much black everything else. It was nice to have confirming approval. I turn around to my beloved

and have to refrain from letting my jaw drop open.

She too was wearing all black, but in the form of a lovely strapless dress.

"You look...quite incredible, Denise." I compliment after remembering how to speak. She grins at my praise.

"Maybe you'd like to help me take it off...later?" She inquires boldly, while turning a bit pink.

I, of course, feel my face heat up. "If you find yourself desiring assistance..." I say, closing the distance and grinning down at her. "Then I would be more than willing to provide as much." She chuckles and leans up to kiss me.

"I'm so lucky I have you." She says, her tone suddenly more serious.

"And I you." I reciprocate. We pause and let each other's love flow into each other.

"Shall we?" I eventually speak up.

"We shall." She confirms, and we head out.

The night was filled with much laughter and love. I was so happy to see the family together.

My family.

Oh, how I would miss them.

"I think he's going to do it." I whisper to Denise we stand next to the stairway. She looks in the direction that I'd gestured and her eyes widen.

"I think you're right." She whispers back in agreement.

We both watch as we see Mike fiddle with a small case in his hand that looked precisely like the cases one places engagement rings in.

He was looking at El, who was currently speaking with Selenia. We see him take a deep breath, walk over, and ask El to come with him for a moment. She sees him looking clearly distressed and agrees instantly. They both leave the room, and we exchange grins.

"Well, that's happening." Denise grins wider.

"Surprised it hasn't happened sooner." I chuckle.

After about ten or so minutes had passed we saw the two of them walk back in with barely contained smiles.

"Everyone!" Mike called for everyone's attention, and everyone turned to face them.

"We're engaged!" El positively glows with happiness, and everyone roars with applause, taking a moment before rushing the two with congratulations and questions.

Denise and I exchange excited looks and join the others in celebrating the newly engaged couple.

After a little of the excitement had died down, and trust me that took a while, the dancing had started. Lucas, and surprisingly Will, had really busted out some serious dance moves, shocking and delighting the bystanders.

"Your sons sure do have the moves." I compliment to the now Mrs. Hopper and Mrs. Sinclair.

"I never knew." Joyce breathed out, clearly impressed.

"They both have grown up so much." Mrs. Sinclair said misty eyed. "And now one of their friends is getting married sometime in the near future."

"I know, right?" Joyce agrees, but pauses to think and smile. "But then again, we all knew that would happen eventually."

"True." Mrs. Sinclair concedes.

"Better watch out." I chuckle. "Lucas might be next."

Mrs. Sinclair looks from her son to the redhead that had a claim on a portion of his heart and smiles.

"She's a nice girl. I just hope they take their time."

"They will." I assure, and see her relax. "Now if you both would excuse me, I've got someone very precious to me that I'd like to ask to dance." I start to make my way to Denise, but hear Joyce joke with Mrs. Sinclair before I get out of earshot. "Does he even have to ask? She'll hunt *him* down."

I reach her, and she smiles as though I'm the only one she wanted to see at that very moment. I extend my hand in invitation. She smiles and takes it.

During a slow song, she leans in to talk a little quieter.

"Mortifer?"

"Yes Denise?"

"I..." She looks up into my eyes. "I'm really glad you came into my life. Before you I was lost, but you *found* me. You *saved* me, more than once, and you brought me into the light. I love you. I love you so much." She finishes earnestly.

I just stared back into her dark eyes, heart full to bursting, and eyes starting to water.

"I..." I break off as I feel a tear escape and run down my cheek. She lovingly raises a hand to wipe it away, and then keeps it there. I lean into her hand, feeling full, and smile adoringly back down at her.

"I really, *really* love you." I say happily.

"I know." And again, we go in for another kiss.

The music changes to the one I had specifically requested, and I smile knowingly at Denise.

'Daring, you've got to let me know...'

Everyone including Denise and I laugh or groan, depending. I was well aware of their history with this song, and thought it fitting. Fitting because, the family was coming even more together, and because, soon...I would have to go.

'Should I stay or should I go now...'

Nearly everyone at least joined in swinging each other's arms around, laughing and enjoying themselves. Mike and El in particular were having quite the fun time.

Still Denise kept her eyes on me, having quickly realized why I had chosen this song. I shrugged, a bit embarrassed.

"You're a nerd." She said affectionately, and continued moving to the beat of the music. Her eyes never leaving me, a peculiar expression in her eyes. The message was clear, all the way to the end of the song, though she would never say the words out loud, because she already knew what was to come.

Stay. Please, stay.

Before leaving I sought out El, Kate, and Selenia. Telling them I had a gift to impart to them, they came with me to the kitchen.

"What is it Morty?" Kate asks.

"Something you didn't know was taken from you a long time ago." I answer cryptically. "Is it fair to assume that you all may eventually desire to have young ones of your own?"

They all turn differentiating shades of red but nod one by one.

"The tests those people at the lab ran on each one of you has rendered this impossible from happening." I saw flashes of outrage and fear cross their faces. "Now, I will restore what was taken." I hold out my hand. El places her's in mine first, then Kate, finally Selenia. I feel the gift course through me, in turn flowing into them and healing

that which I had previously mentioned. I pull my hand away, still feeling the Gift touching my eyes.

"It is done." I finish, and am crushed by the three in a fierce hug.

"Guys..." I wheeze out, laughing a little. "I need to breathe."

"When the time comes, let me join all of you for the final battle." Selenia requests.

"No." I say simply.

"What? Why not?" She asks, incredulous.

"You have no training, in either body, mind, or power." I respond, trying to sound sensible.

"True. But there's still like a month to go so you can teach me a little, and I can make *a lot* of fire. Jonathan told me that fire hurts a lot of them. I could help."

"Sounds like a longshot. I would prefer to avoid those."

"Please." She all but begs. "I don't want anything to happen to you guys. You are my family now."

I take a deep breath and ponder for a while. She seems to sense this and just waits.

"It will be ugly, terrible even." I tell her.

"I know. But, you all are worth it."

Another long pause.

"Very well. I will teach you what I can in the amount of time we have." I concede and begin walking towards the forest, a gateway already opening at my command. I turn back and look at her.

"Are you coming?"

She rushes after me.

"Now, that is an apt battleplan Lucas." I compliment.

"Thanks Mort, but do you really think it will work?" He sounds doubtful, which is understandable.

"It will serve its function." I assure. "Adjustments will have to be made, of course, but this is the best we can hope for."

Lucas nods, accepting this.

"I just wish we had more numbers." He spoke.

"I think I've brought precisely just that."

We both look up to see Denise standing with her remaining Dark Hunters, which was a shocking amount. I guess I'd suspected she hadn't brought her cadre's full strength to Hawkins all those years ago, but still...wow.

Ten's P.O.V.

"Ready Ten?" Seven asks. "It could be any day now. Either they'll come to us, or we'll go to them."

"Which do you think will happen?" I inquire.

"They'll come to us."

"What makes you say that?"

"Just a hunch."

Hm...

"Well, the Dark One actually seems excited for what's to come." I state. "So, I guess we probably shouldn't be that worried."

There is a short silence.

"Hey Ten?"

"Yeah Seven?"

"If you find that one thing, that one thing you think Denise found, don't let go of it, okay?" She says, turning around, sounding stiffer for some reason.

I stare at her back, confused. She seems upset, but not the normal kind of upset. There's no anger in her voice.

"Seven...are you okay?" I ask, voice full of concern.

"Of course." She tries to say dismissively, walking off.

Seven...

16. Battle in the Upside-down

Selenia's P.O.V.

I walk through the gateway with that of a regal stride and emerge to see the horror that the others had so often referred to as the Upside-down. The air itself seemed volatile to the point where constant exposure over a prolonged period of time would surely spell one's demise.

This, along with the multitude of enemies currently crawling out of the ruins, gave me pause.

I stood clad in golden armor, gifted to me by Mortifer, before the many nightmarish creatures now running towards me. Their bloodlust could be felt through the air. As the one in front roars in challenge, I grin.

And release massive waves of hungry flames in all directions.

The monsters shriek and howl, writhing in pain and agony as the flames consume them. I wouldn't let up though.

I extend my hands and call my flames to even more extreme heights, seeking out the twisted creatures all the more, and burning down whatever structures I could with cleansing fire. I see a great fortress not too far off and figure that's where we'll be headed.

The entrance is clear for the moment. I voice over the telepathic link established by our team's more gifted individuals.

The next moment I hear footsteps hitting the ground behind me and smile as I am joined by my friends.

"Damn." Lucas lets out a low whistle, as I turn around to grin at him, I see Mortifer enter last through the gateway, his expression grim.

"Alright everyone. You know the plan. Let's see this finished."

Lucas's P.O.V.

I watch as everyone heads off in one of the three spearheads I had devised. But now, being in the actual moment, I couldn't help but wonder if my plan was actually very wise. I mean, I tried to make it so it would be easier to regroup and fall back if we were pushed too hard on one flank but still...

Selenia and I had remained by the portal in case a last fallback was needed in the unlikely event both of our acrobats were incapacitated. Three of Denise's warriors were also with us, along with Nancy and Jonathan who were waiting to see where they would be needed.

"Be safe." I whisper to no one in particular.

Kate's P.O.V.

I put a gaping hole through a strange insect-like creature's head with another psychic bolt, reveling in how easy it was for me to wreak such destruction upon our enemies.

I turn around and see Dustin brutally carve another monster in half with his primal-looking axe. The others, to include Denise's warriors, the Hendersons and the Sinclairs were fairing similarly, the former utilizing weapons of fire.

As we keep cutting our way forwards I can't help but wonder how the center and right spearheads were fairing.

If it was as good as us then we didn't have much to worry about.

Denise's P.O.V.

I fired another burst of incendiary rounds into the assaulting beast and was rewarded with witnessing it fall lifeless from its position. The next moment I was ducking underneath another grotesque abomination as it leapt at me in hopes of catching me unawares. Instead, it found its head being severed by the one and only Jim Hopper before it touched the ground.

I grin at him with a feral glint in my eyes, to which he returns a stoic nod. It is strange but this is the first time I've seen Hopper fight. I didn't expect him to be so calm and collected. Don't get me wrong, he was merciless, exploiting the enemy's weaknesses in a cold,

methodical manner.

His wife Joyce on the other hand...

I watch as said woman hacks her way through our adversaries with a savagery rivaling that of Dustin's. Her twin grey axes falling wherever an opening presented itself.

Impressive.

But none of that could come even close to the devastation *he* was reaping upon the enemy.

Our unassailable grey angel tore his way through the massive amount of nightmares pouring from the Citadel. His hands cleaving apart the creatures with ease, assuming they got past his great wings. Each feather seemed to be a sort of sword too, as they severed head and limb.

This is all, of course, disregarding the truly staggering amount of psychic waves and bolts that were endlessly pouring from him, wreaking more havoc than we ever could have as a collective whole.

Somehow, I doubt the other spearheads are encountering this fierce of a resistance. It's understandable though, why wouldn't you throw the majority of your forces at the most potent threat?

My thoughts are interrupted as another dark being leaps into my field of fire. Quickly silencing its roars of challenge with more incendiary rounds I turn to see the rest of my warriors following my example with a precision I couldn't help but be proud of.

I turn back to see the love of my life tirelessly destroying the assaulting enemy forces, not just pushing them back, but *advancing*. I wonder for a moment if he is even going all out or still holding back.

Probably the latter.

A literal war is raging around us and I still can't help but sneak in the occasional glance, briefly taking him in as he is now, the embodiment of all that is good in the world. I do this because I know soon, I will no longer get the chance.

Soon, he will be gone.

Will's P.O.V.

I stealthily take out the more intelligent looking enemies with my duel blades, not pausing to admire my handiwork, only moving to the next target.

All the while I am keeping an eye on my friends and comrades. El is raising a shocking amount of hell, whether that be by destroying buildings, crushing monsters, or compelling objects to cripple the advancing horde. She was even doing this crazy thing where she held her true blade with her psychic will and preceded to employ it should anything actually get close to her. Not that that usually happened...

Because Mike was being an absolute killing machine. The former dungeon master had gone elite champion, and wasn't tolerating any monster to be near his fiancée for long. When the situation called for it he would break off to take on a particularly strong approaching enemy, whether that be a monster or one of Denise's corrupted warriors. This was assuming that I hadn't already gotten rid of it myself, of course.

I make a wide sweep with both of my blades and lop off the many heads of a most peculiar creature, it almost reminded of a dragon, before turning to survey my team again.

The Wheelers, Mike's mom and dad to be specific, were going to town on the assailing forces in their own right too, with Denise's loyal warriors backing them up with their well-placed shots, or more up close and personal blades of fire. How the swords continued to be constantly lit aflame, I do not know, but it was of quite a help now so I see no reason to question it.

Suddenly, a great roar, maybe more like shriek sounds a little way in front of our set path and we see a beautiful, armor-clad, raven-haired girl approaching with an almost familiar creature behind her.

Wait...that's...it couldn't be.

It stands up on two legs and lets out another ear-piercing shriek. My

teeth grit together in recognition.

Demagorgen.

Dustin's P.O.V.

Okay, not to jinx anything but this was starting to seem a little too easy.

Don't get me wrong, the denizens of the Upside-down were savage and dangerous, but we had been well-trained. Not to mention we had yet to encounter anything our true weapons couldn't cut apart.

There is a clearing we'll have to cross to get to our rally point, but as soon as one of the assassins make their way over the rubble into it, a strike of lightning suddenly rips through their torso.

We look up to see a young woman adorned in elegant looking dark armor, hand extended towards us.

That couldn't happen unless...

More of Denise's turned warriors filled in firing what seemed to be corrosive rounds with more of the Upside-down's abominations. The armored figure just stood and waited a few moments more, before taking further action.

The next moment we were crouching under the cover of the ruins like our lives depended on it, and judging by the streaks of lightning flying over us, they very much did.

I took a moment and made myself calm down and think.

We are pinned, and the enemy is advancing on our position. Soon, we'll be in a world of hurt. The main thing standing between us and victory is that armored female warrior. I've already seen some of the others take shots at her, but none of the rounds seemed to even damage the intricate suit she wore. One shot even pinged off the helm, and she seemed none the wiser. This was bad.

I look down at my axe and it hits me.

I could strike her down, if I got close.

Taking a moment to quell my reluctance at possibly taking down one of the eleven, I gather my courage to do what must be done. I would tell Kate, but she's also pinned down on the other side of these ruined buildings, just barely out of sight. I check to see with the group's telepathy works, but it seems to have been silenced for some reason.

I see a dark aura begin to emanate from the warrior and realize why this is the case.

Well, someone's gotta do it...

I turn to the warriors beside me, and yell over the shattering of the dark structures around us.

"I'm gonna take her out! Cover me!"

They nod their acknowledgement, and I leap over my cover to begin my charge.

My foes are brought down by precise weapons fire around me and any that survive I quickly mow down, my attention never leaving the young woman. She finally seems to notice me and directs two bolts my way as an afterthought.

I do the only thing I can think of and bring my axe up to deflect the blow.

The moment it hits I feel part of me set reeling from the mass energy that was being diverted or blocked by Mortifer's weapon. Still I strive forward, making my way ever closer to her.

She takes more notice and fires several more bolts my way, but after a good deal of enduring and pain, I keep making my way towards her. Once I'm within about ten yards, she brings her full attention to me and blasts me with a ridiculously insane amount of energy. I try to hold on but it's too much, and before I know what's happening I feel my axe fly from my grasp and my knees hit the ground. The assault stops for a moment as the warrior seems to take me.

"Who are you?" I breathe out. The warrior cocks her head to one side,

as if pondering.

"Seven." She speaks her name like a curse, but then I feel a shift in her nature. "Don't cry for me, and remember me if it's not too painful."

I look up at her in confusion, which turns into total bafflement as I see her raise her hand, filled in electricity, for the killing blow. I close my eyes, and hear the bolt leave her fingers.

But nothing comes...and suddenly I hear Kate let out a great battle cry. I open my eyes to see her crashing through the enemy lines, making short work of anyone standing in her way.

As soon as she rushes past me another gale of supercharged energy makes its way from Seven's upstretched hand, but Kate is blocks the attack strength for strength with an impenetrable psychic wall. Once she closes the distance, she lashes out with her spear. Seven is quick to counter, however, materializing a black trident for the parry. The weapons crash and both realize what weapons the other is using. After a series of strikes and further deflections, whether it be from the weapons, lightning, or psychic bolts, Kate manages to get a bolt into Seven's chest.

Everything suddenly stands still. Seven lets her weapon fade from existence, and looks down at the gaping hole in her chest. She crumples to her knees and reaches up to tear off her helmet.

An adorable young woman with chestnut brown hair looks up at us with her wearied hazel eyes, and smiles weakly.

"It's done." She whispers faintly. "Finally done."

I can't help myself. I can't let someone looking like *that* die without having a measure of comfort. "You can rest now Seven." I say soothingly, getting up, and walking over to her. Kate's wrath seems to dissipate at the sound of the number. Her expression turns to guilt.

"Seven. I'm sorry." She whispers, but Seven shakes her head while electricity starts to slowly cover her body, originating from where her heart would be.

"I'll be fine." She whispers, sounding even weaker. "You are..?"

"Kate. But I used to be called Eight."

"You got a new name. I wish..." She runs out of breath.

Kate looks at me, eyes pleading for assistance. I come back down to one knee in front of Seven.

"How about Heaven?" I suggest gently, moving forward to catch her as she falls backwards, strength leaving her. But she still manages a withering smile.

"Heaven..." I could barely hear her. "Yes."

"You can rest now Heaven."

She closes her eyes, and utters two more words before letting her head fall back.

I set her down gently, placing her in a position of dignity. Before rising up and looking at Kate, who had tears streaming down her face.

"That..." She starts but stops before continuing. "That could have been me."

I pull her into a hug, that she reciprocates after a moment.

No words are said, but I'm sure we both keep hearing Sev-...Heaven's last words.

Save Ten.

El's P.O.V.

I take in the new challengers with an analytical gaze.

The demagorgen had gotten bigger, and now had glowing black claws on each limb. I suspect they are composed of the same material as the blade Denise used to have.

"Mike. Let's do this." I hear Will growl. Mike looks back at me.

"Only block its claws with your sword." I tell him, to which he nods joins Will. The two make their way to the demagorgen, which had broken off from the raven-haired warrior that now stood across the battlefield from me. We lock gazes and understand what must come next. I bring my full-strength to bear and begin walking towards my adversary. After a beat, I see her begin to do the same. Any blade, bullet, or creature is stopped in its tracks as I make my way towards her, only to see the same phenomenon occurring on her end. Interesting.

We both close the distance, our black and grey swords suddenly materializing with a loud *crack*, and begin with a series of crashing blows.

Both blades find the other unbreakable as we both slash and parry. While this brutal exchange of blows is occurring, our psychic wills are crashing in the background. Both of us sought to control the environment around us to use for our own ends, but neither was able to gain true dominance. As a result, the structures, and most objects actually, began to crumble or break apart furiously. We both quickly gave up trying to control the other almost instantly, recognizing it to be a futile effort.

After a bit more of dueling each other back and forth the other warrior spoke with a wild grin covering her features.

"I have never met an equal before." She snarled out. "May I have your name?" Not seeing the harm, I answer, never letting my focus stray from the real conflict before me.

"El."

"El." She coos out, then frowns. "Wait, Eleven? There were more after me?"

"Who are you?" I ask.

"I am Ten." She spits out, her blows becoming more hate-filled, but I was just as unyielding.

"I was the last." I snarl back, and see her anger grow.

"You will fall to your predecessor!" She yells and continues our deadlock struggle with fervor. The thought of attempting reason occurs to me.

"You would be alone?" I utter as the building next to us shatters.

"I won't be alone." She scoffs. "I have Seven."

Seven. Another one of us. I wonder where she is right now.

"Seven?" I pry, trying to expose a weakness. "Where is your friend now, if not next to you?" A flicker of confusion crosses her face.

"Friend?" She questions. "She's probably handing it to the rest of your people as we speak."

"Really?" I press. "How do you know?"

She laughs. "Trust me I know."

Despite this, I feel a slight fraction of her mind reach out, searching for her companion. It's not enough to dull her form though, or even her psychic hold. I feel the slightest bit disappointed in my futile effort of distraction, but see Will approaching behind her stealthily. Perhaps she really is the slightest bit distracted, or Will really is just that good. Whatever the reason I had no complaints.

Without warning she freezes mid-swing. Both me and Will surge to disable her. Will places his blades around her neck as I knock her blade from her grasp. She makes no effort to retaliate though, as her face has taken one up of a lost child, who just lost a parent.

"Seven." She whispers. "No. Not you. Please, not you."

She slowly falls to her knees, with Will arranging his blades to accommodate her new position, and silent tears begin to fall.

"Kill me." She whispers after a while.

I look at Will in confusion.

"Kill me!" She yells, and I flinch. "I am your enemy, so do it!"

I look back at Will who, after a moment, lowers his blades, shaking his head. He walks around to kneel in front of her. His blades disappear.

"Why?" He asks, his eyes piercing.

She starts to cry.

"Because I'm all alone now." She whimpers.

I don't know what to do. I just stand there. Paralyzed. Mike strides over to us, having clearly shed much monster blood as some of it is still slicking off his armor, but takes one look at me and stops. He takes in the scene, brow furrowing in confusion, before addressing Will.

"Will..."

"Not now Mike." Will silences with a deathly calm.

We all stand in silence, waiting for someone to act, the sound of battle still going on, but a little ways from us.

"Come with us." Will finally says.

The girl looks up at him incredulously through her tears.

"What?"

"Come with us." He repeats, standing up and extending his hand towards her. "We will show you what love is. What family is. You will not be alone."

She just stares at him for a few moments, eyes searching for any deception.

"Is that what she found?" She asks, voice small. "Denise. This 'love'."

Will smiles and I swear he looks a little bit like Mortifer for a second.

"Yes, I believe so." He says earnestly.

A few more moments pass before she nods, and takes his hand.

"Okay."

Mortifer's P.O.V.

The Old One would have to show its face soon, or what passed for a face, there was hardly anything left standing between us and the fortress that Denise informed me was dubbed the Citadel.

A terrible, nigh incomprehensible form impacted the ground in front of me, blocking the rest of my way.

Speak of the Enemy...

GREY ANGEL. IT IS TIME.

"So it is." I gather my full-strength and leap towards the dark being, using my wings to manipulate my jump, while simultaneously blocking the lances of dark energy it was firing upon me.

Now. I say via telepathic link. My champions, having spread around the Old One, stabbed their weapons into the ground. A dome of impenetrable grey energy took shape around us, a fact that it instantly took notice of. It cocked its head in question.

"You are trapped and cannot run Old One." I inform with a hint a challenge in my voice. "The dome prevents you."

There is a short pause.

THE FIELD IS KEPT UP THROUGH YOUR POWER. ONCE YOU ARE GONE, EVENTUALLY IT WILL FALL.

It charged me without warning with blurring speed. Luckily my Gift had kicked in by then, and I was able to deflect and parry its blows with nigh perfect efficiency. Before long I lashed out with moves of my own. It eventually overreached with one of its attacks and as a consequence I delivered crucial blow with one of my wings.

It recoiled and looked at the black ichor pouring from its supposedly invincible form.

It seemed to realize in that moment that is was going to lose.

And then it started laughing.

Confused I simply waited for it to speak up.

It did not disappoint.

YOU CANNOT KILL ME ANGEL. I AM ONE WITH THIS DIMENSION NOW. IT IS ME, AND I AM IT. IF YOU STRIKE ME DOWN, BEFORE LONG I SHALL RETURN TO HAVE MY VENGEANCE.

Well...damn.

That's a pretty low move. I have surprisingly not encountered this before in my many battles.

How would I deal with this threat?

I could strike it down now, but as it says, it will be back.

No, I need to remove the threat, so that the others may live on in relative peace.

So how could I...

Oh...I could...could I? I've never tried.

It would fulfill the rules at the same time too.

I take a deep breath, resigning myself to my fate, and whisper the word that I use as a keystone for my powers pulled from that which is past me.

"*Calibir.*"

The white flames start seething from my entire form, and the Old One's expression turns to one of fear.

WHAT. WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

The ground begins to shake and the air begins to distort.

WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!

I deliver a series of hyper-quick, crippling blows, as the Old One seeks to advance and stop my action. With a shred of my power I lift up my champions and those that had accompanied them.

I love you all so very much. I say to them and hurl them through the portal knowing it'll collapse any moment now. With them gone I bring my full attention to the task at hand.

The Old One was part of this dimension.

I can't destroy a dimension.

But maybe, just maybe...

STOP! It roars in fury.

"No, you were right. You'll keep coming back. But your power has limits too. There are some things about your dimension you can't manipulate. Like where it is in the realm of the universe."

YOU CAN'T.

"Oh, but I think I can. Just this once, and since you can't leave your dimension now..."

DEMON!

"Now that." I grin. "Is a great idea. You've gone through great efforts I'm sure to hide from the Enemy. How about we go somewhere close to *his* realm?"

EVEN YOU WOULD NOT DARE...

"I have nothing to fear from the Great Rebel." I declare, filling my reach tighten. "Now I'd hold on. This is gonna be a nasty ride."

El's P.O.V.

"El, open it back up." Denise all but commands, I nod, reaching out to open a door through reality but frown.

"What is it?" Mike asks, seeing my confusion.

"There's nothing there." I say after a moment, not quite believing it.

"What?" Denise inquires, voice low.

"He took it away." I say at last. "The Upside-down...it's gone."

"Can you find him?" Will chimes in, tending to Ten, who is just sitting silently.

I close my eyes and try, but after a little while of searching I open my eyes and shake my head.

"Can't find him." I state.

"But you could use the *bath*, right?" Lucas suggests, but quickly catches himself. "After you've recovered and are up for it, maybe?"

I nod, thinking it just might work.

"I'll try."

17. After the Angel

One month later...

Will P.O.V.

I observe the cook out unfolding from our decent sized family, and can't help but feel my lips curl up.

We are so lucky. So, lucky we have this. I look down at the raven-haired girl I was already becoming quite attached to, taking in her admiring and questioning eyes.

"Ten?" I prompt. She looks at me with her usual curious gaze. "What is it?"

She seems doubtful at first, but speaks up anyway, in a quiet voice.

"Do they like me?"

I chuckle, not at all surprised by the inquiry. She had been with us for approximately a month now, but her timid nature hasn't yet worn off. She kind of reminded me of Denise when she was first learning about love from Mortifer. But, even if it kills me, I will get her there.

It's the third time I've managed to get her out of the house too, so it's not like the others have been exposed to her all that much. As I ponder her question, I realize that they probably don't even have enough experience in her company to determine whether or not they 'like' her. But hey, all in good time.

"Hard to say." I answer honestly. "They hardly know you, but if you keep hanging out with us, they'll come to love you."

Her eyes widen.

"L-love me?"

"Yeah." I confirm, and she's silent for a few minutes, deep in thought.

"You know me." She states, catching me off-guard.

"I guess." I concur. "I still have a lot to learn about you though I suspect."

She nods but I still see a question on the tip of her tongue. I say nothing further, letting her gather up her courage.

"But...do you love me yet?"

The question is so innocent, so hopeful, I can't help but smile wider.

"Of course I love you." I confirm, and see her eyes light up, her smile coming unbidden. "I've already come to care about you a lot."

She beams, before turning away her gaze, her face scrunching up in focus.

"You think El, and the others would mind if I joined them?" She inquires shyly.

"I think they would like that." I say with a grin. Suddenly she shoots up and hugs me, before dashing off to the girls. I just watch for a few moments, happy to have finally gotten her to open up a little more. Mike walks over to sit next to me. After a couple moments, he speaks up.

"She's doing better than I would have expected." He gestures to the one warrior in the group who was a match for him.

He's not wrong, after El's failed attempts at finding him via the bath, Denise had revealed to us the Rules we had so seldom heard about, and all our hearts had sunk.

But, after a week of mourning we had managed to start pulling it back together. Don't get me wrong, there were still many times where one, or more of us would suddenly break down, or excuse ourselves to be alone.

He was our protector, guardian, and friend. No, he was our *family*.

But now...he was gone, and unlike El he wouldn't be returning. The Rules had seen to that.

But, we were all there for each other. The first week Denise had tried to hole up in the lodge, away from everything and everyone. El wasn't having it. Though still being quite broken up herself, El had all but forced her way into the house to find a weeping Denise in the kitchen.

Mike was, of course, there for El. As was Dustin for Kate, and so on and so forth. This often worked in reverse as well, since we guys had loved him very much too.

I nod slowly to Mike.

"It seems that way, but we can never know how she is when she's alone, or even how she's doing right now on the inside."

Mike looks at me in surprise, then understanding.

"You're right, Will the Wise." He agrees, giving me a small chuckle.

"You still insist on that nickname after all these years." I say, a hint of humor touching my features.

"Well, it probably wouldn't have stuck if it wasn't so true." He pokes, but turns solemn. "You know...I think you're the most like him."

Caught off guard for the second time today I just stare at him with an inquiring eyebrow.

"No really. I mean, out of us guys, you seem the most like him." He continues earnestly. "Dustin has his humor, such as it was, and his savage joy for life. Lucas has his humility, along with his strategic insight, even if he doesn't realize it. But you...you have his wisdom, his compassion and love."

"We all have his love." I correct.

"Maybe so." Mike concedes. "But, I just wanted you to know what we see in you Will."

I smile, mulling over all he had just said, when I realize something.

"Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"You didn't say what you had."

"Huh?"

"You gave everyone else's characteristics but your own." I press. He looks down.

"I hadn't really thought about it." He mutters, and I smile.

"You have his protective spirit, and his inviting presence." He starts to laugh.

"I mean it." I lightly scold him, and after a few seconds he calms down.

"Thanks Will."

"Sure thing." I pause a second, before a wry smile forms on my face.
"So Mike..."

He hums in response.

"When's the wedding?"

If he had a drink, he would have spit it up, but as it was he suddenly lost his footing, or rather, his seating. After recomposing himself he turned back to me.

"We were thinking of next year. To give everyone enough time to heal."

I try to quell my disappointment at this, but I do understand where they're coming from. I mean, the funeral we're holding is *next week*.

"It sucks." I breathe out. "That he won't be there."

"Definitely."

We both share a brief silence.

"But he would be happy that it was happening, you know?" I amend.

"He would be." Mike agrees, while staring lovingly at the girl who had started it all.

Two months later...

"Will?" Ten inquires while lying down to place her head on my lap. I try not to brush. After all it's not like she knows what she's doing would usually imply.

"Yes, Ten?"

"I've been thinking..." She seems shy for some reason.

"Go on, you have no reason to be nervous with me." I state honestly and see her relax.

"It's just...the others have names, real names, and I was wondering...if you would give me mine." She finishes, a hopeful look in her eyes.

I feel my mouth drop in shock.

"M-Me?" I stammer.

"You!" She laughs at my reaction.

"Why me?"

"Because..." She pauses, seeming confused herself. "I don't know. You're just *you*." I stare for a few seconds more, down at the beautiful young woman whom I had taken out of the darkness.

"Okay." I finally agree and see her face light up. "What kind of name were you thinking of?"

"One like El's, Kate's, and...Heaven's." She whispers out the last name.

"So, something different, but still resembling ten?" I inquire.

"Yes, exactly."

"Hm...give me a little bit." I tell her, at which she nods, closing her eyes, relaxing until her mouth falls open to reveal she had fallen asleep.

Hm...

A name to include the number ten.

Ben? Ken? Zen? No those were all boys' names.

I think on this for a good while, trying to find a decent, unique name when it finally comes to me. I'm not sure she'll like it, but that's okay. I'll just come up with another one.

I nudge her awake, she groggily looks up at me and smiles.

"Sorry, did I fall asleep?"

"Yeah, but it's okay." I tell her soothingly. "I've got a name for you." Her smile grows wide.

"What is it?"

"I was thinking...Arten." I let out, feeling a little foolish. Her face develops a faraway look, and I quickly try to amend the situation.

"If you don't like it, I can come up with something else-" I start, but am stopped by her hand pressing up to my mouth.

"I like it." She whispers.

"You do?" I mumble out from behind her hand.

"I do." She confirms, and says her name for the first time, relishing the sound of it on her lips.

"Arten."

Three months later...

Denise's P.O.V.

"Hey Denise?" I hear the familiar questioning of the group's newest member. I didn't mind. She kind of reminded me of myself in when everything first started changing for me.

"Yes Arten?"

"Why do people kiss and stuff?"

I raise an eyebrow at her.

"Like Mike and El, or any of the group's couples." She clarifies.

This seems like an odd moment of *déjà vu*.

"Well, *they* kiss because they love each other." I say simply, and see her face scrunch up.

"So do *I* have to kiss them?"

"No!" I blurt out, seeing her look visibly relieved. "There are different kinds of love."

"Really?" Her curiosity is adorable. "Can you tell me what they are?"

"Of course." I say, I begin to relay to her how Mortifer once explained to me the different kinds of love.

He would be smiling at this moment. I'm sure of it.

Later that night...

Arten's P.O.V.

Alright, there's no reason to be nervous. It's just a simple question. Easy.

Why was my heart pounding then?

Heedless of this, I knock on Will's door, and hear him shuffle around, before the door opens. His warm smile greets me, and I feel my courage begin to crumble.

"Hey Arten." He greets. "Didn't know you were back. How's Denise doing?"

Grateful for the brief distraction I answer. "She's doing okay. But, I can tell she misses him."

He nods in understanding. "Yeah, she's not alone there. I wish you

could have met him."

"Me too." I say, and mean it. If he was half of what everyone tells me about him, then I would have adored being counted amongst his friends. Still though, I have a question. A question that is eating its way at me.

"Will?" I prompt.

"Yeah Arten?"

"Promise you won't get mad?" I squeak out, doubt taking me in its grip.

"Sure." He sounds concerned, and takes my hands in his for comfort. His touch calms me, but at the same time sparks electricity through me. "What is it?"

"I...do you..."

His eyebrows lift up in anticipation.

"Do you want to go to Mike and Els wedding with me?" I want to kick myself for chickening out, but now I'm committed. He looks a little befuddled at my question, but smiles warmly again after a couple moments.

"That sounds great." He says, and I feel my heart lighten a little, all the same.

El's P.O.V.

"Mike?" I whisper, my head currently resting on the shoulder of that very individual as we watch some movie in the middle of the afternoon.

"Yeah El?"

My lips curl up a little at the sound of his voice. "Will and Arten..."

"I know." He says.

"Thought so."

"Give them time though. I mean Will as no experience in that area, and neither does she."

I look up at him.

"We didn't have experience." I state, and see him smile.

"True, and it took us a while to get together so..."

I nod in agreement.

"And now we're getting married." I sigh contently.

I see his smile widen.

"Yes. Now we're getting married."

Second author's note: Well, this is all I had envisioned for my little fanfiction. Anything further I write in it will just be add-ons, whether it be going back in time, or downright continuations. Thank you very much for reading everyone, and as always, your input is appreciated.